

Behind the Mask

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In which the Phantom Thieves accidentally discover that Akira Kurusu, their Leader, best friend, and inspiration, has a Palace. (In which the boy who's been a pillar so far discovers that he cannot repress his pain anymore). Minor spoilers for the game, detailed inside. Sort of a character study in a dynamic style.

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Author's Note

Persona 5 needs to give me back my soul. I kind of need it.

So my only problem with this game is that the protags of the Persona franchise are designed to be rather blank, so that the players can relate to them regardless of their circumstances. However, unlike Makoto and Yuu (3 and 4), who were truly well-played as blank characters, Akira (5) seemed to have a bit of his own personality, in the way he behaved and in the conversation choices. So... I gave the boy with no emotions some emotions. Because let's be honest. This boy has issues.

I just want him to know that he is loved ;-;

Minor spoilers for up to after the 7th dungeon, but there are no names (except party members) or identities revealed. This takes place after the casino dungeon, and Akira's circumstances in that time are alluded to briefly. However, like I said, there's nothing major. I did, however, quote Sojiro's rank 7 confidant word-for-word, as well as quote a bunch of lines from the game, which, coincidentally, I don't make profit off of and I clearly do not own.

The only warning is for canon-typical violence. Please enjoy this monster oneshot!

All too often, Akira felt like a hypocrite.

It was a nagging voice in the back of his head that followed him everywhere, through his high school classes and his afternoon escapades to the Palaces, through his late-night work shifts and into his dreams. It whispered in his ears when he did his homework,

raised its voice when he spent innocent time with his confidants, and absolutely *screeched* when he jumped on Shadows and ripped off their masks.

"Show me your true form!"

Show them your true form! the voice would echo deep in the recesses of his brain, and more often than not, Akira would have to fall back and let Makoto take the first hit until he shook his head clear from the monster within.

How ironic, that he ripped off his mask over and over again, broke his chains repeatedly to challenge his fate every single day, and yet, he still confined his true visage to a second, invisible mask underneath all his cocky self-assurance.

Joker had become the ultimate tool to hide how truly afraid he was.

Every single time Akira wrote his name and the date on his homework, he was struck anew with the realization that he was only a seventeen year-old kid, trying to navigate his way through a world that would never be in his favour.

He was only seventeen years old, and he already woke gasping for breath when his nightmares became vivid enough to be confounded with reality. He no longer counted how many nights he spent sleepless, watching Morgana's small chest rise slowly with each breath, almost expecting a Shadow to crawl out from underneath his bed and tear him apart. And sometimes, Akira realized that if it happened, he would let it.

He did well to hide how much he was hurting inside. Of course, being the leader of a group as influential as the Phantom Thieves meant that he had to keep a level head at all times- and that, he did without fail. Through adversity, he always kept their ragtag group together, always lent an ear to his friends and confidants, and marched them into battle without hesitation, nor regret. When he put

on his mask and coat and discarded Akira to become Joker, he no longer felt afraid.

Only upon his return to the real world did he remember that he was still human in the end.

The first time he had an episode of panic, it was by Ryuji's side, after they returned from Kamoshida's Palace for the last time. The adrenaline coursing through his veins only dissipated once they finished their impromptu debrief in the alley facing Shujin, and began heading home, upon his suggestion. Almost like a blessing, Morgana volunteered to walk Ann home, considering that she seemed exhausted from their near-death experience, and that left Akira with Ryuji.

Only then did Akira realize that his hands were shaking and that his heart had begun to rise in his throat.

"I'm beat," Ryuji huffed, stretching as they began to walk towards the station. "But... we did a good job. Even if I almost died at the end there," he chuckled, as if he'd just told a really good joke.

It didn't feel like a joke to Akira. He wouldn't laugh about losing the only person who truly understood what it was like in his heart.

"Yeah." He figured his noncommittal grunt hadn't given away his anxiety and shoved his trembling hands into his pockets to hide them.

"Sounds like you could sleep for days," Ryuji chuckled, as imperceptive as always. However, when he turned to smirk at Akira, his giddy expression fell from his face. It took Akira a moment to realize that it was probably because of him. "Hey, dude. Are okay?"

"Of course," Akira quickly replied, ruffling his hair to hide his eyes. Not that Ryuji would be able to read his expression, but he felt better safe than sorry.

"Sure?" Ryuji frowned, stopping to face him entirely. "You're really white. Like a ghost. Are you good?"

"I'm fine," Akira assured him, "I'm just ti-"

His voice cracked, and he was suddenly rushing to catch his breath loudly.

"Holy shit!" Ryuji was by his side in a second, not sure what to do other than hover around him. "Dude, do you need me to call an ambulance!? Were you hurt in that last fight?"

"Ryuji-" he tried to stop him, but he couldn't breathe. His arms and knees were now trembling, too, and his heart beat almost loud enough to cover the sounds of life moving forward around them without paying them any heed. He doubled over, trying to catch his breath, and Ryuji's hands were on his shoulders immediately.

"Oh shit," his best friend was muttering to himself, and Akira vaguely registered that he was being led away until his back hit a concrete wall. Grateful for the anchor, he leaned against it, trying to find stability within his emotions as well. He only looked up, though, when he registered that Ryuji was speaking to somebody else.

On the phone.

"No," he gasped out, extending a hand to Ryuji's phone. "Please. Don't."

"Hold on," Ryuji stopped himself and turned to him. "It's all good, man. I'm gonna call you an ambulance."

"No," Akira repeated. "I've got this. No ambulances."

Ryuji watched him for a second longer, then turned back to his phone.

"On second thought, he's fine," he told the operator, and paused. "I said he's fine!" He insisted once more, and then hung up.

"Thank you," was all that Akira could manage before he had to stopped and catch his breath again.

"What's goin' on, dude...?" Ryuji's expression fell as he stepped in front of Akira. Having someone corner him against the wall felt oddly soothing, as if Ryuji was standing between himself and the rest of the world.

(If only he could stand between him and his raging emotions).

"It's nothing," Akira shook his head, still not meeting Ryuji's eyes.

"Bullshit!" Ryuji called with his usual tact. "You can't breathe, man! Is it asthma or something? You got inhalers in your bag?"

"Ryuji, stop," Akira couldn't help but chuckle, and hesitantly extended a hand towards Ryuji. Without hesitation, Ryuji grasped his wrist, tightly, tight enough to bruise.

The pain grounded him long enough to try and breathe through it.

"Man, you gotta tell me... please," Ryuji begged, uncharacteristically quiet for someone as excitable as him. "What can I do to help?"

"Don't leave," Akira immediately answered, only realizing what he'd replied after the words left his mouth. In more than one sense, he couldn't imagine Ryuji leaving his side.

"You're stupider than I thought if you think I ever would," Ryuji ground out, and held him firmly in place by his wrist.

A few minutes of silence gave Akira enough time to sync his breathing with Ryuji's, and dispel the last remnants of fear in his system. When he dragged himself out of his little bubble of 'what if's and 'almost's, Ryuji was still there. Their eyes met when Akira lifted his gaze.

"You good?" his best friend asked softly, and Akira nodded, composing himself quickly. He pulled his hand away, and rubbed at

his wrist tenderly. He wondered if Ryuji's grip would bruise tomorrow.

"I'm sorry," he rasped out, his throat dry from the exertion.

"Don't give me that shit," Ryuji frowned. "What just happened?"

"I just..." he couldn't finish his sentence. He couldn't admit how scared he'd been, when Ryuji had tripped over in pain as the Palace fell apart, couldn't admit how furious he'd been, knowing that Kamoshida was at fault for his weak leg as well. He couldn't admit how empty he'd felt in that moment, when, for a second in time, he actually believed that he'd lost Ryuji Sakamoto, the first person to ever accept him just the way he was.

"Spit it out. You know I won't say nothing bad," Ryuji encouraged him, putting his hands in his pockets awkwardly.

"I was just scared," Akira simply admitted. "I thought you were gonna die back there."

"But I didn't, right?" Ryuji looked away, unsure how to deal with the whole heart-to-heart business. Usually, Akira was the one on the receiving end of the problem. "See? I'm still here, and I'm still kickin' Kamoshida's butt, that is," he grinned, but it fell when Akira failed to reciprocate.

Ryuji simply sighed at his silence, and patted Akira's shoulder awkwardly.

"Come on, Leader," he sighed, downcast. "Worrying about the things that could've been isn't like you. The Joker I know doesn't let the past affect his current actions."

Akira's head snapped up so fast, his neck almost cracked.

"I..." Ryuji was right. It wasn't like him to dwell on the past. Not outwardly, at least. Ever since his initial arrest, he hadn't really spoken about his experience with anyone. The police, under that

drunk man's thumb, had not given a shit about the young life they'd ruined. His parents, furious with his behaviour, had not stopped for a second to realize that their son had been destroyed. His friends, scared of his new reputation, had distanced themselves from him almost immediately. The court, impersonal and mechanical, had ruled his case guilty almost even before he walked into the room.

And then, coming (being sent away) to Tokyo had not helped at all, as his roller-coaster of a life had kept him from sitting down and coping with the tragedy that had befallen him.

There was so much pain and anger and fear festering inside of him that Akira could no longer contain it.

Or so he thought.

"You're right," he found himself saying, gripping his pain with both hands and forcing it back down inside of him, holding it down so that it didn't re-emerge. His weaknesses would never see the light again. Not if he could help it. "It's not like me to dwell." He closed his eyes, and visualized Arsene's mask materializing over his face again. Though it did not appear, not in the real world, at least, when he opened his eyes, he felt like he'd gotten his neutral expression under control again.

Ryuji seemed satisfied and grinned brightly at him.

"That's more like it!" he cheered him on, clapping him on the back. "Alright, let's get out of here. You must be really, really tired. I'll walk ya home!"

Though there were lingering tones of worry in Ryuji's voice, he no longer seemed at a loss like he had been earlier. That was good enough for Akira, who nudged himself away from the wall, and followed Ryuji a bit numbly towards the train station.

The wind blew around them, carrying on it whispers that Akira could still not discern, at that time. However, he knew that the voice

whispering to him was his own.

No pun intended, but as time went on and the Phantom Thieves accomplished more and more incredible feats, Akira became better and better at slipping masks on over himself. Specifically, when he entered the Metaverse and adorned the elegant coat of his thief outfit, he felt like a brand new man- one unburdened by worldly emotions such as terror and hopelessness. Soon, acting as Joker, the leader of the Phantom Thieves, became a coping mechanism. Whenever his emotions got too hard to control, he called the team to Mementos, if only to adorn his mask once again and bury the insecurity that was furiously trying to claw itself out of the recesses of his heart.

It worked for many, many months. Nobody saw through his façade, just the way Akira had intended things to be, and with every victory over his demons, he felt more and more invincible.

His only moments of vulnerability occurred often in the early hours of the morning, where a nightmare would pull him out of a restless sleep, his pounding heart reminiscent of the first time he'd lost his composure. On nights where Morgana stayed at Futaba's, Akira cracked and smothered silent sobs into his pillow. On nights where he wasn't alone, he'd try to breathe along with Morgana's rising chest, and would bottle up his weaknesses for his next night alone.

Akira Kurusu often felt like a hypocrite.

He'd given Ryuji a place to belong, Ann a reason to keep fighting, Yusuke a rekindling of his passion. He'd given Morgana his assistance and support, Makoto the strength to seize the reins of her own life. He'd gotten Futaba to trust in others and Haru to trust in herself.

And yet, he still couldn't bring himself to give them the real Akira Kurusu.

Instead, he gave them Joker, the reliable leader and confident hero, because surely, nobody would follow the insecure child behind the mask into the dark.

The second time he had an episode of panic, he didn't even see it coming. He didn't even have time to prepare himself, steel himself against the two entities raging inside of him and fall behind the mask that would protect him.

Even worse, it happened with Futaba and Sojiro on another innocuous day at Leblanc. Futaba, the girl who always seemed like she could see right through him, and Sojiro, the man who would secretly worry if Akira so much as breathed the wrong way.

They had been talking about curry, of all things. Curry, practically the safest topic you could get these days. Futaba had been at the table, laughing. Sojiro had asked him his opinion on a new dish at Leblanc. It was bright out and the café had been quiet and serene so far.

The door opened with the jingle of a bell, and Akira turned to greet the customer.

When he spotted the older man stalking towards them angrily, his welcoming smile melted into a frown. Futaba's uncle stopped right by Futaba's booth with his arms crossed, his expression vicious.

"Why haven't you answered my calls?" he demanded without so much as a hello. In her seat at the booth, Futaba had frozen up in shock.

To his credit, Sojiro only looked annoyed.

"Leave now, or else I'll be forced to contact the police," he threatened, not even bothering with formalities. "I'm not giving you a penny."

"What was that...?" the man seethed. "Quit fucking with me!"

Before Akira could step in and kick the guy out again, Futaba surprised him by jumping out of her seat and standing up to her uncle. Her face was set seriously, and she seemed to have put every ounce of courage into this simple act. Akira couldn't help but be proud of how far she'd come.

"Stop it!" she warned. "Sojiro didn't do anything wrong!"

"Shut your mouth, brat! It's your fault I'm in this mess!" her uncle warned, and Futaba's hard-earned courage seemed to melt away quickly. She stepped back, and Akira shifted his body weight towards her, just in case.

"Look," Sojiro began again, going around the counter to join their huddle as backup. "Futaba's my daughter. You may be her uncle, but you have no connection to her anymore." He stopped behind Akira with his arms crossed, towering threateningly enough for a retired café owner. "We can take it to court if you really want. Don't underestimate how hard I'm willing to fight."

"What...?" Futaba's uncle seemed taken aback, and Akira couldn't help but mentally score a point for Sojiro.

"Not only are you in massive debt, but I heard you failed in your most recent business venture," Sojiro continued without hesitation, almost as if he'd rehearsed this confrontation. "How do you think the court would respond if they knew how wasteful you were with your money?"

The man's face turned redder and redder with every word Sojiro spoke coolly, until he seemed like he would burst. Instead, he turned to Futaba, who was visibly trying not to run behind Akira.

"Goddamnit!" he curled his fists angrily. "This is all your fault, you bitch! You cursed little-!"

Five Palaces and endless floors in Mementos had honed Akira's instincts to a fine-point, so when Futaba's uncle shifted his body

weight to his right side, Akira moved without even thinking.

Futaba moved, too, though her instinctive reaction was probably due to long-standing abuse at the hands of the man before her.

She jumped behind Akira, and, fearless as ever, donning his invisible mask as Joker, Akira stepped forward to shield her.

"Futaba!" Sojiro cried out, clearly not having followed the turn of events as quickly as his younger charges, but Akira had already ensured her safety.

He pushed her back, stepping out of the way, and Futaba's uncle swung with all his might a right hook that connected with thin air.

The momentum took him by surprise, and when Futaba's uncle tripped, he ended up slamming face-first into the floor.

There was a second of stunned silence, which was broken when Akira released the breath he didn't realize he'd been holding. He froze where he stood, blood rushing in his ears, and wondered why, after so much combat experience, a simple punch seemed to have fazed him so much. Futaba was safe. He was safe.

He couldn't place the feeling of apprehension that seemed to be driving a foreboding nausea up his throat.

Futaba's uncle's moaning and groaning from the floor caught his attention, and Akira stepped back (-he didn't shy away, he didn't shrink in fear-) when the man pushed himself up on his elbows.

"Th-This is assault!" he cried out finally, lifting his gaze towards Akira and locking it with his. Akira couldn't help the way his eyes widened slightly. "I'll sue!"

" *Damn brat... I'll sue!*"

Akira knew, even before his lungs froze mid-motion, that he would not be okay.

"What are you talking about? You clearly fell on your own," Sojiro shook his head, raising an eyebrow without an ounce of belief in the threat.

" You fell on your own."

The threat had been weak the last time as well, and yet...

" Shut up... You're done for. You're gonna learn what happens when you cross me!"

"This delinquent attacked me!" Futaba's uncle insisted aggressively. "He's dangerous!"

" Explain what happened to the good officer."

"... That young man suddenly attacked him... He shoved this gentleman to the ground. And... this man got injured."

"This café's finished, you hear me!? I won't let you get away with this!"

" Hey. Cuff him!"

The man turned to leave, and almost unconsciously, Akira stepped towards him. He didn't know what he wanted to do. His eyesight was blurry. His heart beat violently enough to hurt his ribs. He couldn't breathe- he couldn't inhale- exhale- inhale- exhale- He had to- Follow- Do what?

What could he do, in the end?

He was back in the streets of his hometown, standing by this woman who wouldn't stand by him, alone, so alone, abandoned, worthless, cast away despite his strong convictions and his strong heart... He'd be sent away again, his parents would hate him more, he'd let everybody down, they'd all shun him for doing it again- again- again-

He'd never be strong enough.

His body refused to answer to his commands, and he stayed frozen in place as his emotions struggled to swim out of the waves of memories crashing upon the shores of his mind. A part of him knew this wasn't real, that it wouldn't happen again, Sojiro would never let it-

But what if... what if he did?

"Goddamn..." Sojiro sighed, rubbing his face tired. "What a pain in the ass. Don't you have enough problems already?"

His voice drew Akira a bit closer to reality, and he turned to answer. He didn't know what to answer. The rational part of him, now so quiet in the back of his mind, told him to assert himself, say that he'd been protecting Futaba. The desperate part of him, scared, but still fighting, told him to defend himself, insist that he hadn't done anything wrong. And then, the defeated part of him demanded he apologize, for something, for anything, everything.

"I'm sorry," Akira rasped out, his voice locked in a tight ball in his throat. He shoved his hands in his pockets to hide their violent trembling once more. His shoulders might even be shaking at this point, but he wasn't aware of himself enough to tell. He felt a bit numb, detached, as if his mind was moving away from his body.

He was quickly aware that this was the exact same thing that had happened with Ryuji at the beginning of their adventure.

He had to get away.

"Uncle said he's gonna sue..." Futaba was saying worriedly, looking up at Sojiro with a silent plea. Akira couldn't say anything to add onto that. Keeping his composure was a war that he was quickly starting to lose.

Not again. Please, not again.

The voices in his head were screaming now, deafening in his ears. Sojiro was saying something, seeming awfully calm and collected, but Akira couldn't hear him.

" Damn brat... I'll sue!"

" Cuff him!"

" Don't do anything stupid... I'll throw you out if you cause any trouble."

" Your parents got rid of you for being a pain in the ass."

" If you are thrown out of our school, there will be no place for you to go."

Sojiro's voice suddenly turned to him, but Akira didn't register what he'd said. However, his guardian seemed to be waiting for some kind of answer, so, painstakingly, Akira nodded. That seemed to satisfy Sojiro, and he walked past Akira to leave.

Futaba seemed to hesitate. She glanced up at Akira, and Akira did his best not to look like he was falling apart. He was too far gone to tell whether or not she fell for it, though.

"Akira," she simply called, her voice breaking through the screeching in his ears. "I'll... message you later."

Akira nodded numbly again, and when she began to move, he prayed that she'd leave faster.

He held himself together just long enough for the door to close with a jingle.

As soon as it did, Akira stumbled forward, holding onto the counter for support as he dragged his body forward. Ideally, he wanted to make his way upstairs, but considering that he couldn't feel most of his body, he figured he wouldn't be able to make it up the steps.

Instead, he dragged himself behind the counter, and stumbled to his knees by the sink.

There, alone, with his face in his hands, he pushed Joker away from his heart, and let his inner child tremble and cower and wail.

Something was wrong with Akira, and everybody could tell.

He didn't reply much to their group chat, even when others asked him his opinion. He asked them to Mementos every single day, even when they had no requests to fulfill, saying that being confined at home for his own safety bored him to death. Even then, even as he slayed countless Shadows one after the other, none of his usual self-confidence seemed to shine on his face. The smirks he gave when he passed a baton were half-hearted at best.

If Makoto didn't know any better, she'd say that Akira was terrible at hiding his emotions.

As such, she drew the line when Akira insisted they keep going once they reached a rest area, despite everyone in the party, their leader included, being absolutely drained.

"Joker," she shook her head when he made a move for them to get up. "I don't think we should keep going for today. Everybody's exhausted, and we've been going to Mementos for four days in a row now."

"I can keep going," Akira insisted softly, almost as if he didn't believe himself either. But Makoto would not back down.

"As the advisor of the Phantom Thieves, I cannot condone this order!" she crossed her arms. "Whatever's going on with you, Joker, you need to snap out of it. Your emotions are clouding your judgment!"

That seemed to have an effect on Akira, who looked up at her almost disbelievingly. Makoto couldn't help but flinch at the confused plea in his eyes before his mask shadowed his gaze.

"You're right," he cleared his throat, straightening his shoulders and glancing over his teammates. "Let's head back."

"Alright!" Mona cheered first, jumping out of his seat to run for the tracks on the other side of the platform. As those tracks were a one-way route from the top of Mementos to the bottom, they would not encounter any Shadows on their way up (just the occasional ghost train that they'd have to pull over to avoid). That bode well for everyone, and they all headed towards the tracks with various expressions of relief.

Makoto was the one who hung back with Joker once the others began to pile into Mona's car form, gently touching his upper arm. Joker surprised both of them by flinching away from her touch, though he'd never been touch-shy before.

"Is something the matter, Akira...?" she asked softly, scrutinizing his neutral expression. It was hard to tell what he was thinking when his mask obscured half his face.

"Are you tired enough to forget my code name, Queen?" Joker simply teased, and spun around to enter the car as well. Makoto followed, worriedly watching him go.

The ride up was uneventful, with only two trains to dodge on the tracks before they were emerging at the entrance of Mementos. Joker subtly nodded at Justine, who nodded right back to him by the Velvet Room's entrance, and headed for the exit with everybody else in tow.

"Whoo!" Ryuji cheered as they gathered up to activate the Meta-Nav. "We got some good training in today!"

"Right," Yusuke nodded. "Joker's been working us to the bone lately, but I can definitely see our arduous training bearing fruit!"

"Hey, Joker," Ann turned to Akira, who seemed lost in thought as he watched Haru activate the Meta-Nav. "You think we could take a break tomorrow? I really want to go to this shoot my agency lined up for me. I'd have you come, too, but..." she smiled sheepishly. "It's best we keep you safely out of the public eye for now."

"Right," Akira nodded distractedly. "I'm dead."

"I know you're getting restless, Joker, but maybe a day of relaxation would do you some good, too!" Morgana suggested.

Akira nodded, and Haru warned them that she was activating the Meta-Nav.

The familiar sensation of pulling in every direction assaulted Akira for a few seconds, but he let himself be carried away by the strange pain until they landed in the real world again.

"You have returned to the real world," the Nav announced in its mechanical voice, and Akira checked around him to make sure that none of the Shibuya subway-goers had realized that they'd suddenly appeared out of nowhere. He immediately pulled his hood up, over his face.

"Good job, everyone," he praised. "I'm tired, so I'm gonna head straight home."

"Wait, Akira," Makoto called him. "I want to ask you something."

"Ask me on the chat. I'm sure it's nothing," Akira shrugged, turning to leave rather abruptly.

"What?" Haru frowned. "Are you sure you're okay? This isn't like you."

"I'm about to fall asleep. You guys should head home as well," Akira recommended, walking away from his friends regardless. He seemed to be ignoring the varied looks of confusion and concern that were thrown at his retreating back.

"Akira, hold up!" Ann called, but Yusuke quickly coughed to cover it up.

"Do not yell his name," he warned. "The walls might have ears."

"Akira Kurusu, you get back here right now!" Makoto hissed, as if that would solve their problem. However, either their leader was too far to hear her, or was consciously ignoring her. He simply kept walking, and they shared a look of worry when he disappeared into the crowd.

At that moment, the Meta-Nav reacted.

"Candidate found."

Ryuji yelled so loud that police officers stopped by to make sure they weren't up to anything suspicious.

"I knew it."

"There's no way," Ryuji insisted, glancing at Futaba, who didn't look as smug as she always did when she turned out to be right. "It has to be someone else." Even as he laid casually across the student council room's sofa, he seemed tense. They all were.

"Another Akira Kurusu?" Haru asked, half skeptical, half hopeful.

"A quick search of the people registered in Tokyo doesn't back that up," Futaba shook her head, tapping at her phone. "Lots of *Akira* s, not a lot of *Kurusu* s, but only one Akira Kurusu."

"What if it reacted for two different people?" Ann tried hopefully, leaning her head across her arms folded on the table.

"It's never done that before, and it wouldn't make sense for it to start now," Yusuke muttered, chagrined.

"I think we've got to accept it, even if we don't want to believe it," Makoto bit her lip, glancing down at her phone.

"I can't do that!" Ryuji exclaimed, sitting up on the sofa abruptly. "He's... He's my best friend! I know him, I know what kind of guy he is... There's no way his heart is distorted!"

"Ryuji..." Ann mumbled, downcast. "I know how you feel, but..."

"You can't give up on him like this!" Ryuji turned to her. "Ann! Come on! This is Akira we're talking about, the selfless guy who took down Kamoshida despite everything going against him! This is the guy who saved me from being alone, who gave you a chance to fight for Shiho, who saved Yusuke from a life of exploitation, who showed Makoto how to be herself, who taught Futaba to trust in others and who got Haru out of an arranged marriage. He's the guy who swore to help Morgana get his memories back. He's our friend, our leader, a fellow Phantom Thief... so don't tell me you're not gonna believe in him."

"Ryuji!" Makoto chided him. "That's enough!" Her demeanour softened, however, as soon as Ryuji threw her a betrayed look. "I know... I know that Akira has done a lot for all of us, but... His name is a hit on the Meta-Nav. That means, despite every logical reasoning we can find, that Akira Kurusu, our friend, our saviour... has a Palace."

"That can't be right..." Ryuji protested weakly, falling back on the couch. "He's... he's my best friend... he's a really good guy..."

"Can it be... that he's been using us for another end all this time...?" Haru suggested weakly, squeaking in fear when she was thrown a

dirty look by Ryuji.

"No way!"

"Ryuji, don't yell at her!" Ann smacked him over the head. "She's just... she's just brainstorming..."

"This ain't right..." Ryuji cradled his head in his hands. "This is bullshit... Akira would never... he'd never take advantage of us. Any of us!"

They all fell silent, eyes riveted on Makoto's phone on the table, which still had the Meta-Nav open on it. Nobody seemed to want to speak up, either too scared to say what they thought, or too much in denial to even try.

Finally, Futaba shifted from where she sat on a chair, swinging her legs idly. All eyes were drawn to her, though she didn't do much.

"I've been thinking..." she started, lowering her gaze when she realized she was being watched intently. "Something happened at Leblanc the other day, and, umm... Akira he... he didn't seem right."

"What do you mean?" Yusuke frowned. "Did you make note of an oddity in his behaviour?"

"I can't put my finger on it," Futaba danced around the issue of her uncle precariously. "But... he seemed... I don't know... lost?"

"Lost?" Makoto frowned, uncomprehending. "I'm not sure I follow."

"That's not the right word for it..." Futaba sighed. "How do I put it...? He looked like he was more occupied with stuff going on in his head than with the situation at hand. Like he'd fallen asleep upright at some point. Or if he'd had a partial seizure. Or if he has dissociative identity disorder and lost time for a while."

"I... don't think that's right..." Makoto winced. "But... it's worth investigating."

"We're gonna enter his Palace?" Ryuji blanched. "We can't do that to him. He trusts us, and we should trust him. If there's anything he'd hiding, he would tell us without us having to pry through his cognition..."

There was silence.

"Right...?" he finished pathetically.

"The thing is, Ryuji... I don't think he'd tell us," Makoto refuted sadly. "As much as he trusts us, Akira has... gone through difficult circumstances. He could even, under certain definitions, be considered a trauma victim, and... well... trauma victims don't always give all the facts."

"Wherever this conversation is going, I don't like it," Ryuji grumbled.

"We know, already," Ann rolled her eyes. "We know he's your best friend. He's our friend, too. We love him just as much as you do. But... we need to be realistic here."

"What do you think, Morgana?" Yusuke suddenly turned to the cat, who was lounging on the windowsill of the student council room. "You've kept silent thus far."

"Mona...?" Haru asked hopefully, turning to him along with everybody else. Morgana did not flinch under the pressured gazes thrown at him, merely seemed to ponder.

"I've got an idea, but you might not like it," he finally admitted.

"I haven't like anything we've said so far, so just spit it out," Ann crossed her arms uncomfortably.

"Right..." Yet, Morgana hesitated. "Remember that a distorted point of view on the world often stems from an overabundance of sin, but a distortion can happen at any point in time when one emotion overwhelms all the others. Palace rulers aren't all evil, they've just let

their circumstances taint their worldviews, which gives rise to a cognitive stronghold that inherently protects their greatest desire."

"I... I don't get it..." Ryuji frowned, glancing over at Futaba, who seemed stricken. "Hey. What's all that mumbo-jumbo mean?"

"Ryuji..." Makoto sighed, looking overwhelmed as well. "Remember what Futaba's Palace was like...?"

And finally, finally, realization seemed to dawn in Ryuji's eyes.

"Oh god..." his eyes widened in shock. "No... not him. He can't..."

"We're going to save him," Ann interrupted his stuttering with a firm grip of his upper arm. "He's saved every single one of us time and time again. And now, it's gotta be our turn to save him."

The Phantom Thieves exchanged glances amongst them, unsure at first, but firmer when they saw conviction within one another.

"Alright, then, everyone." Morgana jumped from the windowsill, onto the table, towards the Meta-Nav. "The mission to steal Akira Kurusu's -our leader's- heart has begun."

GROUP CHAT- P. Thieves

Akira: So what did you want to ask me today, Makoto?

Akira dropped his phone on the bed as he waited for a response, instead changing into his pyjamas. Morgana hadn't returned from wherever he was just yet, so he still had time to enjoy the silence.

A tone announced that Makoto had replied to his text. Akira took his time getting dressed before sitting down on the bed to check the reply.

Makoto: You seemed on edge.

Makoto: I was wondering if something had happened.

Haru: Are you sick? I know a good doctor who will keep silent if you need one.

Akira rolled his eyes at their persistence, but texted back nonetheless. He didn't want to worry them, after all.

Akira: I'm not sick. Being confined doesn't agree with me though.

Futaba: You're crazy :U Confinement rules!

Ryuji: Uhh... Futaba, you're on a whole new level of confinement though.

Ann: Man, it must be driving you crazy to have to stay home all the time.

Futaba: Does Leblanc feel like a bad place to you?

That seemed like a strange question to ask. Akira frowned, not sure what to reply.

Akira: No...?

Nobody replied, which made Akira feel uneasy. He felt miles away from the rest of them, as if they were sharing an inside joke that he didn't know of.

Akira: I mean, it's Leblanc. Can't complain about coffee and curry every day.

Futaba: True... hmmm... curry...

Makoto: Okay, well... I just wanted to be sure you weren't letting this whole arrest situation get to you.

That had Akira laughing, at the very least.

Akira: Newsflash, Makoto. I've been living in an 'arrest situation' for months now.

Ryuji: Well, he ain't sick if he can still be snarky.

Ann: Take care of yourself, Leader.

Akira: All of you should go to bed. You have school tomorrow.

Yusuke: So we shall. Good night, Akira.

Akira dropped his phone on his bed and got back up, heading for his crafting desk. Some materials were still strewn about, unfinished infiltration tools in the midst of the mess, and Akira intended on finishing them for when he headed into Mementos again tomorrow.

He was exhausted, but hopefully, fighting Shadows would keep his mind off the unease roiling in his gut.

"And what do you think you're doing, young man?"

Akira turned to the windowsill when he was called out, and smiled softly when he saw Morgana make himself comfortable on his bed.

"Infiltration tools," he simply offered. "I want to go to Mementos tomorrow."

"What?" Morgana exclaimed. "No way! We agreed to take a break tomorrow!"

"I won't drag everybody in with me," Akira assured him. "If you could come with, I'd really appreciate it, but I'm just gonna get my warmup done for a little while."

"Why can't you just train at home? Or at the gym?" Morgana grumbled.

"Why don't you want me to go to Mementos? I thought you wanted me to get to the bottom of it, literally, so we could retrieve your

memories."

"I don't want you to run yourself ragged in the process. You're our leader, Akira. We need you in tip-top form," Morgana's tail swished low.

"Joker's your leader," Akira rolled his eyes, focusing on his tools. "And I can assure you, he's fine."

Morgana said nothing to that, which Akira was a bit thankful for. It allowed him to focus, and soon enough, Joker had returned, working proficient fingers and creating infiltration tools as if it were second nature.

GROUP CHAT- Joker Protection Squad

Futaba: Are we meeting today?

Makoto: I'll clear the student council room at Shujin after school. Come through the back, I'll escort you in.

Haru: I'll be there right after I run to the roof!

Ann: Ryuji and I will head there ASAP.

Yusuke : I will be a little bit late; it seems that train service is slow today.

Futaba : I just picked Mona up from Leblanc.

Futaba: ETA 2 hours? I'm gonna try to go buy crepes from Shibuya first.

Ann: Good luck Futaba-chan.

Ann: Bring me one, too!

Futaba: Lmao, get your own :U

GROUP CHAT- Joker Protection Squad

Ryuji: Are you here yet Futaba?

Futaba: Trains had a malfunction, I'm late.

Ann: Another psychotic breakdown!?

Futaba: No, worse.

Futaba: A shutdown.

Haru: God, no!

Futaba: Of the ventilation system.

Futaba: :P

Ryuji: FUTABA, YOU LITTLE

Makoto: Instead of making terrible jokes, you could hurry a bit, Futaba-chan.

Futaba: Start without me.

Ryuji: Can't start without Mona though.

Ryuji: He's our main informant on our target.

Futaba: I'll text what he says for you guys.

Yusuke: Hello, due to malfunctions on the train lines, I will be late.

Ann: We know.

Ryuji: We know.

Makoto: We know.

Futaba: Lmao

Makoto: On to business.

Makoto: We know that Akira Kurusu has a Palace.

Haru: All we need now is the source of distortion, and the distortion itself.

Ryuji: Any ideas?

Futaba: I would've asked you, since you know him so well, Skull.

Ann: Akira's not a very talkative guy, if you haven't noticed.

Futaba: Wait Mona is struggling in my bag. He might know smth.

Makoto: Smth?

Ann: Short for 'something'.

Yusuke: Text dialect is fascinating...

Yusuke: What is Lmao, then?

Futaba: Lmao

Futaba: Ok Mona's got smth

Ryuji: Go Mona!

Futaba: Oh nvm. It's complicated. Too lazy to text it.

Makoto: FUTABA

Futaba: Chill, Queen! ETA 5 minutes, we're walking towards you.

Yusuke: I as well. I will attempt to meet up with Futaba-chan.

Futaba: Just try it, Inari.

Makoto:...

Makoto: Well, we may as well wait, then.

Makoto: I will meet you at the gates in 5 minutes to escort you.

Futaba: Roger that!

Yusuke: I will be there.

Yusuke: Also, I reiterate, but what is Lmao?

"Texting you is a goddamn sport, Futaba," Ryuji groaned as the young girl walked into the room, following Makoto and Yusuke.

"I take that as a compliment!" Futaba beamed, opening her bag to let Morgana jump onto the table.

"Now that we're all here, we'd better talk business," he urged.

"Absolutely," Makoto agreed, sitting down at the table.

"So what's this thing you noticed that is too complicated to be said over text, Morgana?" Ann asked curiously.

"Akira said something weird yesterday," Mona sat in the middle of the table. "When I got home from our meeting, he was making infiltration tools, saying he wanted to go into Mementos today."

"What? But he said-"

"Alone," Morgana interrupted pointedly. "Said he wanted to get more training done, but he looked exhausted."

"Well, yeah!" Ann groaned. "I don't even have a shoot planned today! I just wanted us to lay down and breathe for a second."

"Why is he pushing himself so far...?" Haru sighed, looking down sadly. "Does he think he's not strong enough?"

"Regardless," Morgana redirected the conversation. "I called his name, and said that we need our leader to be in the best shape possible at all times."

"Which is a given."

"But when he replied, he worded things weird. I don't even think he realized it," Morgana frowned, his tail swishing stiffly from side to side. "He said something about not being the leader. He said that Joker is the leader, and that Joker will always be good to go."

"Umm..."

"Yeah, we know you don't get it, Ryuji," Ann sighed. "But... I gotta admit that I don't get it either."

"A very abstract thought..." Yusuke pondered. "I wonder if refers as Joker the persona he adopts when we take our roles as Phantom Thieves. That type of duality of man has long been depicted in art."

"Still don't get it."

"What Yusuke is saying is that... Akira has two different sets of behaviour," Makoto tried to paraphrase. "We've got Akira, who is a high school student on probation, and we've got Joker, the leader of the Phantom Thieves. "

"But... they're only one person," Ryuji frowned. "Wait. Does Akira have a twin!?"

"No, you idiot!" Ann groaned. "I think I get it. You mean that Akira changes the way he behaves depending on whether he's in the Metaverse or the real world?"

"It could be compared to wearing a mask," Haru mused out loud. "But... which one is the mask and which one is the real him...?"

"Well... the existence of a Palace leads me to believe that both are masks..." Morgana sighed. "There's something we haven't seen about him yet. That's what we're trying to find."

"And how does this information help us find his keywords?" Ryuji asked, leaning forward. "If he's carrying anything like Futaba's Palace in his heart, I want to steal his Treasure as soon as possible."

"We all do. But we must take this one step at a time," Yusuke sighed. "Does anyone else have ideas as to his distortion or its source?"

"Weeeeeell..." Futaba hummed, pulling out her phone. "Since I was stuck on the train, I figured I may as well be productive, and I created an algorithm that checked for similarities in Akira's texts from the date he got to Tokyo. I'm running it through our private chat as we speak."

"Futaba-chan, you're a bit scary," Haru laughed uncomfortably.

"Really? I always thought I was cute," Futaba joked, tapping at her phone's screen. "Alright. It's still running, but so far, I've got a few results that stand out. The word he's used most often recently is the word 'chill', which he's used 14 times in a conversation with... some Mishima guy?"

"Yep, nothing out of the ordinary there," Ryuji mumbled.

"I've got 'Leblanc', but I guess that's to be expected," Futaba continued. "'School'... 'Mementos'. 'Kamoshida'... 'Yakuza'..."

"Yakuza!?" Makoto exclaimed. "Is this another occurrence like Kaneshiro!? Is he being blackmailed?"

"Calm down, Queen. Doesn't seem to be the case," Futaba shook her head. "No mention of extortion or blackmail in his conversations."

"What about words that have come up only a few times?" Morgana asked, peering over at Futaba's screen.

"Hard to tell. I'd have to run a lexical field algorithm and teach the AI to recognize Akira's language so that it can then discern words that aren't a usual part of his vocabulary," Futaba turned her phone off and dropped it on the table. "I mean, I can do it, but it'll take some time."

"Anyone got a better idea?" Makoto sighed, running a hand through her hair. "It feels like we're on the cusp of grasping the information we need, but we never quite bridge the gap..."

There was a common sigh that ran across the room at that, and everyone receded into their own heads to think for a while.

"How was Akira today, by the way?" Yusuke suddenly asked, turning to Morgana. "Any different?"

"Not really..." Morgana sighed. "I said I wouldn't go to Mementos with him, so he can't really go by himself without a means of transportation. Funny, though. He woke up and started putting his uniform on before realizing he can't go to school."

"Poor guy..." Ann sighed. "He must hate being cooped up..."

"I can't imagine having to stay indoors all the time," Ryuji hung his head. "I know it's for his safety, and all, but isn't confinement gonna drive him insane at some point?"

There was another depressed silence that befell them at the idea of their brave leader being subjected to such a fate. He had never done anything wrong in his life, and yet, he'd somehow ended up arrested, twice, and subjected to numerous terrible acts. Being kept prisoner in his own home felt like the cherry on top of the figurative sundae.

"Wait..."

All eyes turned to Ann as she pulled her phone out hurriedly.

"What's up?"

"Ryuji, you're a genius!" Ann exclaimed, tapping away at her phone excitedly.

"I am?" Ryuji frowned at her incredulously before stopping himself. "I mean, of course I am! It took you a while to-"

"Look!" Ann interrupted him to shove her phone towards the rest of them. They all leaned in to read the screen, realizing it was the Phantom Thieves' group chat from yesterday. "Confinement. It's coming up a few times in the conversation, and Akira even mentions it himself once."

"Brilliant!" Makoto gasped. "This could be it. Perhaps his Palace has to do with confinement."

"Alright, let's get started!" Ryuji grinned, pulling up the Meta-Nav. "Akira Kurusu, jail!"

"No candidates found."

"Prison!"

"No candidates found."

"Cell?" Haru tried shyly.

"No candidates found."

"Attic," Yusuke suggested.

"No candidates found."

"Court," Makoto attempted.

"No candidates found."

"What the heck?" Ryuji sighed. "I can't think of anything else..."

"Maybe we were wrong about confinement?" Haru sighed. "His Palace may not even be related to anything like that..."

"We should keep trying. It's our only lead so far!" Morgana pushed. "Come on... Makoto, don't you know a lot about police stuff? Can't you guess?"

"About what?" Makoto frowned, not following. "We already guessed the big ones."

"Then try the small ones!"

"Uhh... alright, well... here I go..." Makoto sighed. "Penitentiary?"

"No candidates found."

"Custody?"

"No candidates found."

"House arrest?"

"No candidates found."

"Police station?"

"No candidates found."

"Detention center?"

"No candidates found?"

"I don't know any more terms..." Makoto conceded.

"Keep going! Anything you can think of!" Ann encouraged her.

"God, this is weird..." Makoto sighed. "Prison courtyard?"

"No candidates found."

"Prison dormitories?"

"No candidates found."

"Prison common room?"

"No candidates found."

"It probably doesn't have the word prison itself in it..." Yusuke mused.

"I'm running out of ideas..." Makoto groaned. "Courthouse?"

"No candidates found."

"It better not be something weird like a German torture sex dungeon," Futaba groaned.

"No candidates found."

"Oh, thank goodness," Futaba sighed out in genuine relief. "Not sure I'd have gone into his Palace if it was."

"How do you even know what a German... torture... thing is!?" Ryuji exclaimed.

"The Internet is vast, friend," Futaba shrugged. "Let's keep trying."

"Hospital?" Haru tried.

"No candidates found."

"Asylum," Ryuji suggested.

"No candidates found."

"Special Housing Unit?" Makoto sighed.

"Candidate found."

The room warped around them momentarily, catching everyone off guard.

"Whoa, did you see that!?" Ryuji jumped out of his chair. "We did it! We got it! We got his distortion!"

"What did you say right there, Makoto?" Yusuke asked, just as excited without all the energy to spare.

"Special Housing Unit..." Strangely enough, Makoto seemed downcast and sadder than before.

"That sounds okay, but your expression tells me it's not..." Ann sighed. "What's a Special Housing Unit, Makoto?"

"A fancy term for solitary confinement," Makoto explained, fiddling with her thumbs in her lap. "Akira's Palace is a place where an inmate is confined and isolated from human contact for a long time."

The mood immediately dropped. Even Ryuji sat back down, looking numb from the new information.

"Why does he feel like this...?" Makoto finally sighed. "We... We've always stayed by his side. He knows, I'm sure he knows that we love and care for him, and yet... in his heart, he is still all alone. I don't understand what we've done wrong!"

"Hey..." Ann put a hand on her shoulder gently. "Maybe it's not about us. We still don't know what he considers to be solitary confinement. We don't know the whole story just yet. So we should hold off on our judgment until we figure it out."

"And we will figure it out," Morgana hissed. "We can't let him suffer like this anymore. I don't know what's wrong with him, but we need to act fast. If it keeps going like this, he's going to destroy himself before we can get to him."

"Do we have a deadline?" Futaba asked, her tone indicating that it was an attempt at a joke, but the mood was not appropriate for it to catch.

"As soon as we possibly can." Ryuji's lips were pressed together. "I can't take this anymore... Just thinking that he's hurtin' like this is tearing me apart."

"We all feel the same..." Yusuke sighed. "But... I believe we've reached our limit for today. I suggest we sleep on this topic and reconvene tomorrow to follow up."

"Yusuke is right," Haru nodded. "We struggled with one keyword out of two, so there's no way we'll find the other one today. Let's just spend some time thinking about it."

"Alright, everyone!" Morgana nodded. "So what we know so far is that our Leader has a Palace that manifests as a solitary confinement unit. What we need to figure out now is *what* he considers to be the solitary unit where he is confined."

"Let's all give it our best shot," Ann encouraged them as they stood to leave. "We're one step closer to saving him."

"Hey Akira... Are you happy?"

"That's a strange question, Morgana," Akira raised an eyebrow, turning his gaze to the cat lounging by the foot of his bed. "Why do you ask?"

"You know... I'm just wondering if it's possible to be truly happy in life," Morgana hummed in thought. "Since I don't have any memories, and all."

"Not sure how that applies to your memories, but..." Akira sighed, and shut the book he was reading, leaning back against his pillow. "I don't think it's possible to be 100 percent happy in life. But I also

don't think that's a problem. Emotions need to be in balance to keep you sane."

"True..." Morgana rolled over, stretching his furry paws. "So... are you happy?"

"I am," Akira nodded, and returned his attention to his book.

"What makes you happy?" Morgana pushed.

"Sorry, Morgana," Akira sighed, rubbing the bridge of his nose under his glasses. "I know you want answers, but... I'm really tired. Can we keep the philosophy for tomorrow?"

"Yeah... sorry." Morgana sounded dejected, but Akira didn't seem to pay it much heed. He simply glanced at the cat once more and sighed heavily, putting his book on the windowsill.

"Alright, good night," he wished his companion, folding his glasses on the windowsill as well.

"Night."

Morgana curled up next to him, hoping that somehow, he helped him even a tiny bit.

Akira was always the type to fall asleep quickly, and Morgana never took long to follow. However, he tried to keep his eyes open, tried to stay up to watch over his friend just this once, hoping to discern something, anything that could help them tomorrow.

"Come on, Akira..." he murmured, leaning his head gently on Akira's thigh under the covers. "Please... help me help you..."

Morgana didn't expect much, and yet, Akira delivered. He always delivered, always gave without asking for anything in return. Not even recognition.

Akira was selfless and brave, and Morgana was determined to save him.

Morgana's lucky break came about a half hour later, when he'd dozed off into a light sleep against his will. He was woken by a sudden jerk of Akira's thigh, which smacked him in the face, jolting him to reality.

"What the hell...?" he groaned, looking up at Akira. He was immediately alert when he saw the crisped expression on his face. "Akira?"

The young teen didn't reply, his expression staying crisped for a few second before his hand jerked.

"Lemme out-" he mumbled unclearly, jerking his head to the side. "Lemme go... free..."

"Akira..." Morgana's tiny voice caught in his throat, and he laid down by Akira's side again, torn between watching him and waking him.

Then again, Akira probably didn't want Morgana to know about his nightmares, though Morgana already did. They'd never been this graphic before, though. Usually, Akira only muttered and whimpered. This was the first time he'd spoken words, as chewed up as they were. It had to be significant.

Just as he'd laid down, a violent gasp escaped Akira's lips, and his eyes shot open in bewilderment. Morgana hesitated for just a second before shutting his eyes, pretending to be asleep.

He listened to Akira catch his breath, gasping as if he'd just run a mile, before he felt the covers shift lightly. He'd probably sat up.

"M-Morgana...?" Akira called weakly, and Morgana almost answered him out of sheer concern. But he had a greater agenda at work here, and couldn't afford to lose this opportunity. So he kept his eyes closed, not reacting to Akira's call.

This left Akira silent for a little while, before a little snuffle left him.

"Damn it..." he murmured to himself. "I can't... Don't cry." He sounded frustrated with himself, though Morgana couldn't fathom why. "Push it back in, Akira. You can do this." He took a few slow breaths. "You can't let it out yet. Not yet."

His pep talk to himself didn't feel very genuine, and Morgana suspected he'd done it several times before. He almost pitied him, but refused to look down on Akira.

Akira fell silent, and his breathing pattern changed suddenly. It took Morgana a second to realize that he was breathing in sync with him, and he became very conscious of his own breaths, trying to keep them steady.

Finally, the rustling of sheets and a lot of movement from next to him alerted Morgana that Akira had gone back to lying down. He figured it would not be long until he fell asleep again.

"I'm scared," Akira suddenly confessed to the silence in a tiny whisper, and Morgana's heart shattered. Nothing else followed, though, and soon, Akira's breathing had slowed and steadied again.

Only then did Morgana open his eyes, and allow himself to cry the few tears that Akira had forbidden from himself.

"We have to hurry," was the first thing that Morgana announced when they met the next day in the student council room as usual.

"Did something happen?" Haru frowned in concern.

"He had a nightmare..." Morgana's tail hung low between his legs. "It was bad."

That seemed to sober up everybody in the room rather quickly.

"Alright, let's keep going with our meeting," Makoto prompted them. "Let's figure out what he considers to be his solitary confinement unit."

"Do you think it's a physical place like the rest of the Palaces were?" Ann asked.

"There aren't really any other options there," Ryuji pursed his lips thoughtfully. "His room?"

"Akira Kurusu, Special Housing Unit, his bedroom in the Leblanc attic," Makoto spoke into her phone.

"No candidates found."

"How about just Leblanc?" Futaba piped up.

"No candidates found."

"Yongen-Jaya as a whole?" Yusuke suggested.

"No candidates found."

"Try bigger... Tokyo?" Ann threw in.

"No candidates found."

"Think..." Makoto groaned to herself. "What could Akira consider a place where he's confined all alone?"

"He doesn't really spend vast amounts of time elsewhere than at home, correct?" Yusuke remarked. "There aren't many options here."

"School?" Ryuji tried weakly.

"No candidates found."

"It was worth a try..." he sighed, hanging his head.

"Mementos?" Haru cocked her head.

"No candidates found."

"Anyone got any ideas before we start naming every single place we can think of?" Futaba groaned.

"I can't think of anything..." Ryuji frowned. "That guy's not really the type to let anything restrain him."

That left Morgana with a sour taste in his mouth, for some reason.

"Alright, let's fire off every place we can come up with," Makoto sighed.

"Wait," Morgana interrupted. "I think... I want to try something."

"Give it your all," Futaba sighed, nudging Makoto's phone towards Morgana.

Strangely enough, Morgana seemed to hesitate.

"Akira Kurusu... Special Housing Unit..." he seemed to muse over his next words for a second. "Joker."

"Candidate found. Reduce distance to begin navigation."

"Awh man!" Ryuji was the first one to jump out of his seat, again.

"Just when I thought I was starting to understand, you had to go and pull some meta bullshit on me!"

"What does this mean?" Ann looked at Futaba, then at Makoto, then back to Futaba for answers. "Joker isn't a place. Joker isn't even a real person!"

"To Akira, he is," Morgana clarified. "To Akira, he's a completely different entity from himself. The part of himself that cannot be defeated by anything... including himself."

"So the warden of Akira's isolation unit is his second personality as Joker, the leader of the Phantom Thieves..." Futaba clarified.

"Sounds like he feels trapped by the circumstances surrounding his alter ego."

"In any case, how did you figure it out, Mona? That was quite a leap of faith!" Haru complimented.

"I just... put two and two together, I guess," Morgana glanced at her sadly. "I'll tell you on the way while we hurry and head to Leblanc. Even just standing inside the café should make us close enough to him to enter his Palace."

"Alright, let's do this!" Ryuji cheered with his usual enthusiasm. "Let's save our leader!"

"I wonder what his Palace will look like..." Haru mused out loud. "Solitary confinement sounds lonely."

"It's the loneliest place a human being could find themselves in..." Makoto sighed, getting up to follow. "I just hope we can get him out."

Makoto wasn't kidding. From the second they entered the Metaverse yet again, a cold chill ran across their spines. The Navigator brought them at the doorstep of the Palace as usual, and yet, this Palace was different from the ones before it.

It was dark, so dimly lit that they could barely see a foot in front of them. A ways out in front of them, a red fluorescent sign flashed the words "Special Housing Unit" rather ominously on top of a barely-visible door. No other defining feature existed around them.

"This place is creepy," Ryuji shuddered. "Is this really what it looks like inside his heart?"

"His distorted heart," Morgana corrected.

"Hey..." Yusuke frowned, turning around to look at his tail. "How come we're in our thieving uniforms? Does Joker consider us threats already?"

"Chances are that he considers as threats anyone who gets close enough to his distortion..." Morgana's face dropped sadly. "Come on, let's hurry."

"Hold on," Ann halted them. "Shouldn't we choose a leader by interim since Joker isn't here?"

"Queen is our advisor. She would be well-suited for the job," Yusuke suggested.

"Sure, as long as I get to dish out some ass-whooping and save my best friend!" Ryuji rolled his shoulder.

"Queen is very reliable. It's a good idea," Haru acquiesced.

"Alright... but just until we get Joker back," Makoto conceded. "I'm not as good of a strategist as he is."

"That's why we need to get him back," Morgana nodded seriously. "Now, let's do this like always. Let's secure a route to his Treasure!"

"Right!"

The front-line party, comprised of Makoto, Ann, Yusuke and Ryuji, infiltrated first. Morgana brought up the rear with Haru whilst Futaba scanned ahead aboard Necronomicon's central command.

Strangely enough, the Palace was small enough for Futaba to get a scan of it, even without a map.

"The whole Palace is the size of a floor in Mementos," she explained when Makoto asked about their need for a map. "It's a pretty straightforward layout; one room, and then stairs that lead further down. There are 5 levels."

"The Treasure must be on the last level," Morgana hummed. "This looks easy, but we shouldn't let our guard down."

"Right..." Makoto nodded. "It's the typical layout of an isolation unit, after all. Let's proceed into the first room."

The first room, at the end of the hallway, had a heavy lock and bolt on it. At Makoto's suggestion, Morgana advanced to try and lockpick it.

However, as soon as the lock fell, another one replaced it immediately.

"What!?" Morgana exclaimed. "All my hard work!"

"He's resisting our entry..." Makoto frowned. "Damn it... If this is an instance where we need to convince him in the real world, this plan will not succeed..."

"We just have to find another way to get Joker to invite us in," Haru thought out loud.

At her words, there was a sudden gust of wind from an unknown source, and it took them by surprise.

"All you had to do was ask."

The entire team whirled around to face the newcomer that now stood at the opposite end of the hallway, freezing when the man advanced with a click of his heels.

"J-Joker!" Makoto stuttered out. "H-Ha, fancy meeting you here! We were just, uhh... See... it was an accident!"

"Save it, Queen," Joker waved a hand at her as he approached, his usual, calm smugness plastered over his face. "I'm not the real Joker."

"Are you Akira's Shadow?" Yusuke asked.

"Not quite, either," Joker shook his head. "Akira's situation is... complicated, to say the least. Not only can he wield multiple Personas, with a capital P, but he also wears multiple personas, with a lowercase p. Though he's just one guy, you could say he has two identities."

"Well, you sure are more talkative than the Akira we know," Futaba commented, hopping down and dispelling Necronomicon.

"Well then, Joker... I want to know if you're here to help us, or hinder us," Makoto redirected the conversation. "Because even if it's you, we'll let nothing stop us on our way to saving Akira."

"Relax, Queen," Joker chuckled in genuine amusement. "I'm just a spectator. In fact, I am the part of Akira Kurusu that can come and go as I please. Therefore, I can unlock things in his heart as I please. The other part of him, the real Akira, though... that is another problem entirely."

"Even the Akira we know isn't the real one, correct?" Haru sighed.

"Correct," Joker nodded, doing the iconic wave of his hand that painfully reminded them all of Akira's usual mannerisms. "He's been hiding quite a lot from you all. Are you sure you want to breach his privacy like this, though?"

"If his secrets have tainted him enough to become a Palace of their own, then yes," Ryuji nodded. "We'll do everything we can to save him."

"Alright," Joker shrugged nonchalantly. "Don't blame me, though, when Akira finds out you've been snooping around his heart."

"We'll cross that bridge when we get there," Makoto firmly nodded, and then turned to face the door again.

"See you on the other side," Joker huffed, and disappeared.

As he disappeared, so did the lock on the door.

"Let's brace ourselves," Makoto warned them, and swung the door open.

The inside of the room was exactly as they would have expected a threadbare cell to be. A cot stood in one corner, with a dry toilet facing it. A small flap by the door probably served as the place where meal trays were deposited.

It was... disturbingly silent.

"What are we supposed to find in here?" Ann frowned. "There's nowhere to hide anything."

Their common train of thought was interrupted suddenly when a piercing screech tore through the air.

"What the hell was that!?" Ryuji cried out, covering his ears to minimize the ringing.

" *You problem child!*" the voice screeched again. "*Problem child! Problem child!*"

There was the loud sound of smacking, and the next time they blinked, Akira had appeared on the cot.

Dressed in a dirty-looking shirt and dusty pants, he sat on the side of the cot, matted, greasy hair covering his eyes. His glasses were nowhere to be found. When he looked up with a truly flat expression, a fresh, red handprint had appeared on his cheek.

"Akira!" they all exclaimed at once, though another round of screeching stopped them all in place to cover their ears.

" *You had to stick your nose into other people's business!*" The voice continued sharply. "*We're getting sued! This is money we don't have, you problem child!*"

" *Your mother shouldn't have hit you,*" a deeper voice floated through, though Akira did not react. "*But she's right. You really messed up.*"

" *You messed up.*"

" *Problem child!*"

" *You're leaving for Tokyo.*"

" *Get out of my sight!*"

" *Your parents got rid of you for being a pain in the ass,*" Sojiro's voice floated through the swarm of voices overlapping. Futaba recognized the tone as being a teasing tone, but Akira finally looked up at them, as if just acknowledging them.

"I know," he simply whispered, and faded away.

"Akira, wait!" Ann called him, jogging the few steps to the cot. "Don't go!"

By the time she spoke, Akira was gone. They were alone in the empty cell once more, now even more tense than before.

"I always thought his parents must've been... more comprehensive of his predicament..." Yusuke was the first to sigh. "I guess assumptions don't always end up correct."

"It's horrible that his own parents treated him that way..." Haru clenched her hands over her heart. "I know firsthand the pain of being rejected by the only person in the world who is obligated to love you... I can't imagine how terrible it must've been for Akira to be ejected from his home by his own parents."

"Those bastards..." Ryuji gritted his teeth. "His mom's nothing like a real mom should be! And his dad is practically worse for not standing up for him!"

"Do you think they were like this even before his arrest...?" Ann asked meekly, wringing her hands together nervously.

"They were always fighting," Akira's voice answered her, although when they turned, their friend was standing in the doorway, dressed in a classic prisoner's striped garb. Heavy-looking chains linked clinking cuffs on his wrists and his ankles. His back curved lightly under their weight. "Mom and dad. They always fought, over the smallest things. The only time they agreed was when they sent me away. It must've been my fault they fought. I tried not to talk too much. I tried not to stand out. I tried to be good. I wasn't a good enough child. I got in trouble, and it gave them the opportunity to get rid of me."

"Akira, no..." Makoto's voice broke, though the Akira in prisoner's garb did not seem to react.

"As far as I remember, I've never belonged," he concluded, and with a rattling of chains, headed out into the hallway.

"Akira, dude, get back here!" Ryuji rushed out after him, closely followed by the rest.

However, the hallway was empty again, without Akira in sight. Still, as soon as they were all out of the room, the door shut behind them, and then reopened on its own, revealing a staircase leading down.

"I think that's the way to the next level..." Futaba noted shakily.

"Are you okay, Futaba?" Ann asked, noticing how pale she seemed, even with the large mask on her face. "If this is bringing up too many bad memories..."

"No, I'm fine," Futaba assured. "I've come to terms with my past. It just... hurts to know that Akira hasn't."

"Let's move on," Makoto nodded, leading them further down.

The second level was exactly the same as the first one in appearance. The same door awaited them at the end of the corridor, with the same lock on it. This time, Makoto did not even have Morgana try.

"Joker," she called out into the air. "Let us through once more."

"Ooh, demanding," Joker's familiar cockiness greeted them, and they turned to see the mirror image of their beloved leader walk towards them, coattails flapping in an imaginary wind. "You know, Akira wanted you to lead the Phantom Thieves if he didn't make it out of the interrogation with your sister. For a second, he really believed he wouldn't."

"We'd worked out a plan from A to Z," Morgana insisted. "He must have had faith in us!"

"In you, yes. But in himself...?" Joker let the implication hang, and then snapped. "Alright, enough chitchat. Go on ahead." The lock audibly clattered to the floor again. "Beware, though. You might wanna plug your ears for this one."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Ryuji frowned, though Joker just smirked and disappeared from right in front of his eyes.

"It must be another room full of auditory hallucinations," Yusuke explained. "Keep your wits about you."

"Here we go..." Makoto took a deep breath, and slid the door open.

The voices attacked them almost immediately, overlapping one over the other.

" *Damn brat, I'll sue!*"

" *Hey. Cuff him!*"

" *Akira Kurusu, you are charged guilty of assault.*"

" This school doesn't need a problem like you. You're expelled."

" Get out of my sight!"

" We never should have had you..."

" Do you know how hard it is to find a school for a delinquent like you?"

" You're leaving for Tokyo. Get out of here."

" One false move and you're out of here."

" No school will take you with a criminal record."

" Why does he have to be in my class...?"

" Is that the transfer student with the criminal record?"

" Don't look at him, he might kill you!"

" I heard he stabbed someone!"

" Why is he in the library? Does he actually study?"

" Stay away from him... he's trouble!"

" Don't do anything stupid, or I'll kick you out."

" You're expelled. I'm bringing it up at the next board meeting."

" Smoking, drinking, drugs... I've heard he's done it all!"

" People might talk if they see you talk to me. Make it quick."

" Hah! Of course he didn't get it right. He's a delinquent, after all."

" That's what you get for sticking your nose into business between two adults."

"Nobody else will take you in."

"Enough!" Surprisingly, Makoto's screaming ripped through the murmurs emanating all around them, and they stopped. It left them all in yet another uncomfortable silence, though Ann was visibly trying to hold back tears and Haru had lifted her mask to wipe hers away.

"There's no place in the world for people like you."

"Of course there is!" Makoto yelled again, her voice breaking into a sob at the last syllable. "Akira's place is here, with us!"

"Nobody has the right to be horrible to him like this!" Haru screeched as well, sniffing between sentences. "He's done nothing wrong!"

"People who talk behind his back are scum," Ann added. "They have no idea what he's been through and what kindness he's developed because of it. Why can't they just leave him alone?"

"Akira," Ryuji called out, his voice a bit raspy from holding in his emotions. "Remember when I told you that my place in this world is next to you? And that your place is next to me? I still stand by it. You're my best friend, man. I wouldn't change you for anything in the world."

"I know I belong with my friends... with the Phantom Thieves..." Akira's voice lilted again, and they all turned to the doorway to see the shackled Akira standing there once more, still seeming burdened by the weight of the world. "But I am afraid that I will wake one morning, and they will no longer want me. That I no longer will be worthy of their time. I am afraid that my usefulness will run its course, and that afterwards, I will be thrown away again. I belong... but for how long?"

"Forever!" Yusuke exclaimed immediately. "You'll be one of us forever!"

Akira did not seem to acknowledge him, moving away into the corridor again.

This time, the group took a moment to compose themselves after the trying ordeal. Akira's pain felt so intimate that it almost felt like their own. And in the back of their minds, the knowledge that Akira had been hiding all of this anguish from them was pestering them. He'd been bearing all of these burdens alone until now.

It only made them want to save him even more.

"Let's go to the next one," Morgana mumbled once they were all composed again. They stepped out into the corridor, and just like before, the door to the isolation cell closed, opening again to reveal a set of descending stairs.

Once more, the corridor at the bottom of the stairs was identical. Reaching the lock on the door at the end, Makoto called to Joker once more.

"How are you guys holding up?" Joker greeted as he appeared again, approaching calmly. Coming from him, it should've been sarcastic, but there was a genuine undertone of concern to his words. It almost reduced Haru to tears all over again.

"We should be asking you that question, Joker..." she reflected, trying not to show how upset she was. "You've been through so much, and we're not even halfway through."

"I'm fine. I'm not Akira," Joker shook his head. "I mean, I'm a part of him, but not the part of him who deals with these problems. That's his Shadow, imprisoned at the very depth of this confinement unit."

"Then, if I understand right, you're the part of Akira that takes over when we're pulling off heists," Futaba suggested.

"Correct, Oracle," Joker nodded. "I don't have any problems. I am 100 percent focused and 100 percent unburdened, because the

other part of Akira, the one hidden 6 feet under, is the one who bears them for me. I'm a great leader and a fantastic tactician because I have discarded my pain, and I don't let it affect me. All Akira has to do, no pun intended, is to don my mask, and my peace of mind is his."

"That's why he's been wanting to go to Mementos so much lately..." Morgana sighed. "He's been wanting to escape this pain, and becoming Joker, the master thief, is the only way he can do it."

"He's been exhausting himself, though," Joker sighed. "Talk about overdoing it. I need a break." He snapped his fingers, and the lock on the door fell away noisily. "You'll probably want a break, too, after this one."

"We're gonna keep going until we reach his Treasure," Ann insisted, though she seemed to be wavering.

"Let's steel ourselves," Makoto announced, gripping the handle.

She'd lie to herself if she said that she didn't hesitate before sliding the door open.

The same solitary confinement cell came into view, though this time, Akira was already there.

His school uniform was tattered and splattered with blood, various bruises and cuts decorating his face and whatever parts of his arms were discovered. The crooks of his elbows were wildly bruised, the culprits laying around on the floor carelessly right next to him. He seemed to have passed out from where he sat on a wooden chair, hands cuffed behind his back.

"Akira!" Futaba gasped loudly in distress at the sight of him. Akira did not stir.

Only when two men in suits materialized and splashed him awake with a bucket of water did he rise.

" *No dozing off,*" the broader of the two warned him.

Immediately, Akira began to struggle against his bonds.

" *You still don't get it, do ya...?*" the man sighed, as if dealing with a child's tantrum. "*Give it up!*"

"Akira!" Makoto smothered a horrified gasp to the sound of Akira hitting the floor and coughing to recover from the violent kick to his abdomen.

" *Come on, cooperate!*" the man warned, stepping on the side of his head and grinding his heel into his temple. "*Or what... you want another shot?*"

"Stop it!" Yusuke stepped up in alarm. "This treatment is inhumane! Who allowed this to happen!?"

"Oh god... I'm gonna be sick..." Ann gasped, putting her hands over her pale face.

The man, who'd bent down to grab Akira by the hair, slammed his head back down to the ground. It impacted with an audible crack before it was punctuated with another kick to the abdomen. Akira retched loudly, trying to bend over himself as he wheezed for breath.

"Damn it..." Ryuji was livid, furious tears running down his cheeks. "I'm going to kill them. I'm going to kill every last one of them..."

As if mirroring him, his beaten-up friend on the floor shed a few tears, though he didn't seem very conscious of his surroundings.

The second man finally approached, and though he filled everybody with apprehension, he simply uncuffed Akira, and shoved him back up into a sitting position. Akira was given two whole second to rub circulation back into his marred wrists before a clipboard was shoved into his face.

" *Sign this. It's a confession under your name,*" the burly man explained.

Ryuji was almost proud of him when he batted the clipboard away without a second's hesitation.

However, he flinched away in regret when the man's response was to slam his foot down on Akira's thigh with a clear intent to break something, drawing another strangled gasp of pain from his friend.

" *I need your hand to sign this, but I don't care if you end up losing a leg,* " the man warned him, and then handed him a pen as if he hadn't just threatened to break a limb.

Ryuji remembered what it was like to be screaming and writhing in agony underneath Kamoshida's heel, powerless and defeated by someone who, in a just world, would never have been an enemy.

He lost it.

"Stop it!" he roared, rushing forward, right at the memory playing out before them.

"Skull!" Someone called behind him, but he was too far gone to care. Rearing his fist, he attacked the burly guy in a suit, only for his fist to go through his entirely. The memory fizzed and then went out, taking with it the sight of Akira's hopeless, battered face.

"Damn it!" Ryuji continued, punching the wall behind them, even though the memory was gone.

"Skull, stop it!" Haru screamed as she reached his side, trying to hold him back from punching the wall again. His knuckles had already been broken over the bumpy concrete, yet his rage had him going without regard for his personal safety.

"I can't forgive them!" he yelled again, again and again until his voice broke and he sank to his knees, full-on sobbing. "I can't... ever

forgive them... for hurting Akira like this..."

"I know..." Haru cried quietly as well, rubbing circles into his back soothingly. "I know, Skull. But there's nothing we can do about it now..."

"I didn't know... How much he suffered..." Yusuke choked out, a hand on Makoto's back as she cried.

"Why hasn't Akira said anything about all this...?" Makoto tearfully asked, though her question was more rhetorical than anything else.

Yet, Akira responded.

"Pain is fleeting."

They didn't need to turn to know that the shackled Akira was in the doorway again.

"Pain is momentary. It hurt when I got beaten up, but by the time Sae got to me, I was already numb all over. Pain... wasn't a problem," Akira mused out loud. "The problem... was all the sleepless nights I spent thereafter, all the nightmares in which I relived the interrogation over and over again, all the waking moments in which my mind would wander off and get lost in the visceral memory of that time... The problem was the fear I felt after this, always afraid, of everything, of everyone, of being hurt again one way or another. Though I had braced myself for this in accordance with our plan, I still managed to lose myself to them."

"You didn't lose anything, Akira..." Ann turned to him, holding to her chest a very shell-shocked looking Futaba. "They took it from you. It's not your fault. It has never even once been your fault. Damn it, will you please just take that for granted?" Tears dripped out of her eyes again. "I don't want you to think... you weren't good enough... Because it's the opposite. You're too good. You're too good for everybody in this world and nobody will ever understand that."

"I wish I wasn't so afraid," Akira simply replied, already moving away with a rattling of chains.

"How many more must we see?" Yusuke asked, trying to hide the tremble in his voice.

"Just one more, if Oracle's scans were right," Morgana replied.

"Oracle...?" Ann looked down at her teammate, who was still pressed against her.

"I... I'm fine," she stuttered out, pushing herself away from Ann. "This is just... not what I expected."

"I don't think any of us expected Akira to carry demons like this in his heart..." Makoto sniffled, drying her tears.

"He's always looked so carefree, though," Haru squeaked, escorting Ryuji back to their group with a guiding hand on his back. "Even though he's been hiding these terrible skeletons in his closet."

"Please..." Ryuji rasped out, clenching his fists. "We have to keep going. Let's change his heart. I can't let him hurt like this for a second longer."

"Of course," Makoto nodded, looking at the empty doorway. "Let's get going. Mona, can you take care of Skull's injuries?"

"On it," Morgana nodded, bouncing over to Ryuji to take a look at his hands.

After a few healing spells, courtesy of Zorro, Ryuji's hands had stopped bleeding, and they could move on again.

They exited the isolation room, now huddled closer than before, and waited for the door to reopen behind them.

Makoto called for Joker even before they reached the locked door at the end of the corridor on the next floor.

"Joker," she called to the emptiness around them. "Why? Why hasn't he ever said anything?"

They kept walking, and Joker only materialized once they were halfway across the corridor.

"He's your leader," Joker simply offered as a response, and the group stopped to let him catch up to them. "Leaders have no place for emotions clouding their judgment."

"You said it yourself. Akira isn't our leader, you are!" Ryuji seethed. "So why, damn it? Why hasn't he ever told us how he feels?"

"Fear is a powerful motivator," Joker shrugged nonchalantly. "Fear of judgment, fear of change, fear of abandonment... you name it."

"We'd never do any of that to him, though..." Haru protested firmly. "He has to know that!"

And to that, Joker fell silent.

"He knows that, right...?" Ann pushed, glancing at the others worriedly for clarification. Nobody seemed to have an answer.

"It's... complicated..." Joker finally concluded, running a hand through his mussed-up hair. "Akira's been through a lot for someone so young. Why do you think his heart is distorted? Despite common sense, his emotions have gone haywire and have convinced him that his true self is meant to exist as a prisoner behind the mask he wears."

"He has to believe in us, though!" Futaba glanced up at Joker pleadingly for reassurance. "Right? He knows we've got his back!"

"I know that." Joker shoved his hands into his pockets, now a bit uncomfortable himself. "I know I've got the best team of guys and gals at my back when I fight to change the world. Akira, though..."

"No..." Ann looked down again, heartbroken once more.

"It's easier if you see it," Joker sighed, pushing past them. His wake left a cold trail of air that sent shivers dancing across their spines. "Come on. This is the last one before you reach his Treasure."

"Thank goodness..." Yusuke sighed. "I don't think I would've been able to take much more..."

"We have to stay strong," Makoto reminded him. "He's stayed strong all this time... now it's our turn."

"Now is a good time to use those -kaja skills," Joker quipped, putting a hand on the door. "But really... Don't let it get to you. Remember that this is a distortion. What's real and what's not is up to you to decide."

"That's not foreboding at all..." Futaba groaned.

"See ya," Joker saluted to them cockily, and disappeared into thin air. As soon as he was gone, the lock on the door fell away with a loud clatter.

"Let's stay strong for this one, too," Makoto encouraged them as they approached the unlocked door.

"Right. And let's take his heart quickly." Morgana nodded with determination to see the task through.

They took a collective deep breath, and Makoto slid the door open.

It was empty again, with the same bleak furnishings greeting them. Akira was nowhere to be seen.

Cautiously, they advanced into the room, staying together as they went. The silence buzzed a moment longer before a familiar voice snapped them into action.

" Worrying about the things that could've been isn't like you. The Joker I know doesn't let the past affect his current actions."

"Hey..." Ryuji frowned. "That's... that's me! After Kamoshida's Palace, he had this weird panicky moment because he thought I would die, and I said that to him."

Realization seemed to sink in.

"I said that to him..." he repeated, his eyes wide.

"Skull, it's not your fault," Ann put a hand on his shoulder. "His heart's distorted. You could've said anything, and it probably would've affected him differently than what you intended."

"Ryuji was right," Akira's voice rang out of nowhere. When they turned, their friend was sitting in a corner of the room, knees drawn to his chest and arms wound tightly around them as if to keep himself together. His face was gaunt and pale, his expression downcast. A greenish tint to his skin in certain places spoke of old bruises from various sources.

"I wasn't," Ryuji immediately protested. "Come on, man, you know I'm not very smart. I shouldn't have said that!"

"Ryuji was right," Akira repeated, not moving. "Joker doesn't let the past affect his present actions. But me... I can't help it. Why can't I help it? Why can't I be like Joker?" He dropped his head into his arms, hiding his face. "Why do I always let the past burden me?"

"It's because you've been hiding," Morgana piped up sadly. "I heard you when you had that nightmare, you know. You coached yourself not to cry by pushing your sadness back inside yourself."

"Akira..." Ann bit her lip. "At some point, there will be no place left to bury your pain... You can't keep doing this."

"My memories are never going to leave me alone," Akira gritted out. "I'm always going to live in the past."

And he disappeared.

" Th-This is assault... I'll sue!"

"This again...?" Yusuke frowned.

"No... This is different from before," Makoto noted. "This voice..."

"... It's my uncle," Futaba suddenly squeaked, blanching.

"Your uncle?" Haru asked for clarification.

"He came to the café the other day... Tried to hit me, and Akira stepped in to save me..." Futaba explained shakily, leaving out all the details. "He missed, and tripped over."

" You clearly fell on your own."

" This delinquent attacked me! He's dangerous!"

" This café's done for, you hear me!?"

"This is just like before!" Ann gasped in horror.

"I knew something looked off about him when it happened," Futaba stammered out. "I just can't believe it affected him so much."

Almost as if backing up her claim, the voices died down all at once. The silence rang painfully clear in the time it took for their hearts to beat in unison.

And then, Akira was screaming.

The sound was heart-wrenching, and the Phantom Thieves clapped their hands over their ears to block it out. Ryuji recalled only one instance of hearing him scream his throat raw like that; when he awoke to his Persona in Kamoshida's Palace and violently tore Arsene away from his face. He'd heard him scream through the pain of ripping away the carefully-constructed façade he'd upheld for years and abandoning everything he'd ever made himself to be. And even then, he hadn't sounded so desperate.

Back then, he'd screamed to unleash all the feelings he'd ever repressed. Now, it just felt like he was screaming because he couldn't repress anything anymore.

"Stop it!" Ann screamed, though her voice was lost beneath Akira's anguish. "Let it end!"

"We're coming, Akira!" Ryuji roared out, clenching his fists at his side, and running for the door.

"Skull, wait!" Makoto called after him, but before he could go very far, the sudden appearance of their prisoner friend at the doorway had him skidding into a stop.

"Akira, take us to your Treasure!" Ryuji demanded. "Enough is enough, man!"

"I can't lose everything again," was all the young man murmured. His hands shook, clinking his chains loudly as he covered his face. "Please. I can't be taken away again."

"We won't let anything happen to you!" Haru promised him, rushing towards Ryuji. The other Thieves followed, so that they all hounded Akira without actually touching him. However, as he stood, pathetically hunched over himself, it was all they could do not to hold him.

"I finally found a place where I belong..." Akira whimpered into his hands, knuckles dirty and fingernails chipped from clawing at something. "My place... is here... with my friends."

"That's right..." Yusuke murmured back to him. "You will always belong by our side, Akira."

"So please... Let us save you." Ann didn't seem to think much about her actions, and put her hand out, gently touching Akira's shoulder.

Akira disappeared into thin air.

"Damn it, Panther!" Ryuji exclaimed. "We almost had him!"

"It's not my fault!" Ann squeaked, her cheeks red in embarrassment. "I-I just wanted to help!"

"Please help," Akira's voice murmured in the emptiness. "I can't... I can't do this alone anymore."

"Let's go, Phantom Thieves," Makoto nodded, clenching her fists in barely suppressed anger. "Our leader and friend is counting on us. We can't fail now."

"We're not far now!" Morgana reminded them. "Let's secure a route to his Treasure!"

They all let out a rallying cry and jogged out of the room.

As before, the door shut behind them, and opened to a set of stairs. At the bottom of the stairs, an even bleaker corridor awaited them. The walls, already dripping with moisture, were growing mould in the corners. The floors, cold concrete, were stained darkly in periodic blotches that nobody could identify in the dim light of a single candle at the end of the hallway.

"It's darkest when we get close to his heart," Yusuke murmured as they walked, shivering in the chill of the cold containment facility. "He must not want us to find anything here."

"More like he himself doesn't know what's down here," Morgana hummed in thought. "He's spent so long hiding his true feelings that he's never actually discovered what his heart actually looks like. Therefore, even in his Palace, his Treasure room is poorly defined."

"It's scary to think that he's been hiding so much from us all this time..." Makoto swallowed heavily. "Damn it. I wish I could've seen all of this earlier."

"Well, Akira's a bit of a stubborn mule," Futaba shook her head. "Even when he's clearly not doing well right in front of you, he's still gonna insist he's fine. It's just... a strength of his, and a great flaw."

"We must make him understand that we'll always be there for him, absolutely unconditionally," Haru nodded. "We cannot let him keep going, believing that he must hide from us."

"Let's go, then," Ryuji nudged them forward. "The Treasure awaits."

The welcome sight of the Treasure indeed awaited them at the end of the hallway. As they came closer, the single candlelight that illuminated the corridor became clearer, and they came to realize that the area before them was locked off not by a door, but by cell bars.

Nobody was inside the cell, but the candle cast its light just brightly enough to illuminate some sort of hazy, distorted section of space that didn't quite seem like everything else.

"There it is," Morgana let out a breath he'd been holding. "The Treasure."

"Now all we have to do is send the calling card, right?" Ryuji glanced through the bars to try and see if there was anything else inside the cell.

"Yeah... I'm surprised we didn't encounter any Shadows, though," Ann mused out loud.

"He doesn't want to hurt you."

At the sound of the new voice, they all turned to the other end of the corridor. Through the darkness, Joker swaggered towards them, hands shoved in the pockets of his tailed coat.

"Well, the more accurate fact is that he doesn't want to hurt anyone," he continued, stopping right before them. "I do the hurting. He... He

picks up the pieces after I'm through."

Nobody spoke, processing what Akira's alter ego told them. Almost as if sensing their confusion, Joker sighed, ruffling his hair in a movement reminiscent of their friend's tic.

"I might've helped at first, being the safe place where he could hide his pain long enough to focus on other, more pressing matters. But when he refused to pull out his pain and face it head on, it began to fester inside of him, twisting and warping his heart. I saw it happening, and I..." Joker let out a small noise of frustration. "I'm a part of Akira. In the end, there's only one of him, and I'm only a fragment. His pain is mine, too. And I feel how he feels. There aren't any Shadows protecting his heart because he feels like he can protect himself just by locking things away."

"But you opened the locks for us..." Yusuke pointed out.

"Yeah, well..." Joker finally smirked, taking a step back, and shoving his hands back into his pockets again in a semblance of nonchalance. "I guess a tiny part of him still wanted to be saved."

"Then let's not let him down," Ryuji murmured. "We won't let you down."

"You never have." Joker smiled softly at them, genuine, without any of his haughty invincibility in his tone. He raked his eyes over each and every one of them, and then shut his eyes, finally seeming at peace. "Phantom Thieves... Godspeed."

GROUP CHAT- Joker Protection Squad

Futaba: Agents, come in!

Futaba: The eagle is in position!

Yusuke: I'm not quite sure I understand...

Ann: She's mimicking secret agents in spy movies.

Futaba: Boo, you're no fun, Inari :C

Makoto: Let's get serious, guys.

Makoto: Our target is the most complex one we've had so far.

Ann: Right... Anything suspicious will tip him off immediately.

Yusuke: Ryuji has the calling card, does he not?

Makoto: Yes. We will gather at Leblanc as quietly as possible.

Makoto: Ryuji will be spending time with Akira in the attic while we get into position.

Haru: I shall wait for his signal to begin navigation with the Meta-Nav, correct?

Makoto: Yes. He'll tell us when Akira reads the calling card, so we'll immediately go to his Palace.

Futaba: From what I can tell, Ryuji still hasn't made his move.

Futaba: Everybody, make your way to Leblanc now.

Yusuke: Futaba, may I ask how you know that?

Ann: You bugged Akira's room, too!?

Futaba: Not on purpose!

Futaba: I've never listened in on his room until today, alright!?

Haru: That's... pretty brave, if you think of it.

Haru: Bugging a high school boy's personal space...

Futaba: I resent these implications! D:

Ryuji: Akira went to pee.

Ryuji: You guys good to go?

Futaba: Good to know...

Ann: Isn't it, Futaba-chan?

Futaba: STOP

Makoto: Guys! Be serious!

Makoto: Ryuji, we're gathering at Leblanc in ten minutes.

Haru: Umm... How is Akira-kun doing...?

Ryuji: Looks no different from usual.

Ryuji: If we hadn't seen his Palace, I couldn't tell he's dying on the inside.

Ann: I sense sarcasm...

Ryuji: Man, I really wish he'd told us...

Ryuji: Changing our Leader's heart is gonna leave a sour taste in my mouth.

Yusuke: It's for his own good. We have no choice...

Ryuji: He's coming back up.

Ryuji: Get here ASAP, guys.

Ryuji: And text when we're ready to go.

Makoto: Okay everyone. Eyes forward. Let's do this.

Futaba: ALRIGHT!

"Who are you texting?" Akira asked as he walked back up the stairs, noticing that Ryuji was furiously tapping away at his phone.

"Uhh... I met a cute girl," Ryuji swallowed heavily, putting his phone away. "We're just getting to know each other."

"You finally got a girlfriend?" Akira chuckled softly, dropping on the couch to put some distance between him and Ryuji on the bed.

"Something like that."

"I'm gonna call bullshit," Akira shook his head.

"Put some more faith in me, man!" Ryuji groaned. "I can totally get a girlfriend if I want!"

"Sure..."

"Ugh... Let's just play some video games," Ryuji sighed. "Maybe you'll believe me if I kick your ass."

"Too bad you never do," Akira shrugged innocently, turning to his TV set to prepare the retro console.

Having Ryuji over was a welcome distraction. He always genuinely enjoyed himself when he spent one-on-one time with his friends, especially when it involved some sort of activity that kept his mind off his insecurities. Ryuji was his best friend and sworn brother at this point, despite all his faults.

So Akira could tell when something was wrong.

Like in the way Ryuji's eyes kept lingering on him, as if trying to see through him.

"Is everything okay, Ryuji?" Akira asked casually, turning the console on. "You're acting weird."

"Uh... I'm just a bit nervous with this girl," Ryuji answered, dragging a chair to sit next to Akira. "She's my first girlfriend, and all, you know..."

"Okay. Well, let me know if I can help somehow."

"Yeah, man..." Ryuji's expression momentarily fell, which genuinely shocked Akira. "Same goes for you."

"Yeah..." Akira tried not to frown, and instead turned to busy himself with the game to avoid continuing the conversation.

They played the game for a solid ten minutes, their natural rivalry kicking out all thoughts of anxiety and discomfort, letting Akira truly enjoy this moment next to his friend. When he smiled at times like these, he could feel his heart swell with happiness.

However, the moment was broken when Ryuji's pocket vibrated, forcing them to pause the game so that Ryuji could read his text.

"Sorry about this." Ryuji didn't sound very apologetic, though, as he quickly read the text, and answered something brief. "Well... I'm gonna use the bathroom. Give me a second."

"That's honestly the most suspicious thing you've ever said to me," Akira joked lightly, though he was concerned when Ryuji didn't respond. "Take your time, man."

"Ha, ha. Very funny," Ryuji mocked him, striding towards the stairs.

As he reached them, though, he stopped, and pulled something that looked like an envelope out of his pocket.

"By the way," he called, waving the white envelope. "This is for you. Read it before I get back, okay?"

He left it on the table by the staircase, and disappeared to the ground floor, leaving Akira confused, and concerned.

"What the hell...?" he muttered to himself, dropping the controller and heading for the envelope. His heart was beginning to beat fast again, his brief moment of reprieve lost to the worry of his current situation.

The suspicious envelope was blank, sealed with adhesive so that Akira had to rip it open to get inside. He did so quickly, but hesitated to pull out its contents when something in his heart told him not to.

He did it regardless, not one to back down from a challenge.

He recognized the pattern of the card on the inside immediately, and his heart almost stopped. The logo on the front of it seemed like a mockery of his achievements, the violent reds and blacks burning white spots on his retina. His hands shook as he pulled the whole thing out, letting the envelope flutter down to the floor.

He held the calling card in his trembling hands for a second longer before flipping it over with a new sense of urgency. His eyes scoured over the writing on the back, and he recognized Yusuke's technique and Makoto's words immediately.

Ryuji had given this to him, and somehow, that felt like a betrayal.

"Dear Leader of Hearts..." he began to read, his face paling with every character he read. "For far too long have you let yourself be a victim of the fates befalling you. You've grown complacent in regards to your life, hypocritical as you bestow strength to others but refuse to grow strong yourself. You have confined your pain within your heart and have let it fester beyond control, and this pain has begun to control you instead. Your suffering will end now. We will steal your distorted heart without fail." His breath hitched softly, and he had to put a hand to his mouth to stifle a gasp. "Signed... the Phantom Thieves of Hearts."

He couldn't believe it. This had to be a joke.

His friends couldn't know about him, after all. There's no way they could. Did he even have a Palace? Why would he have a Palace when all his intentions had only ever been good?

His brain buzzed with new information and new fears, and he found himself dropping the card, wishing it would burn.

"No..." he whimpered, putting his hands over his ears to block out the incoming whispers.

" Show them your true form!"

" Nobody else will accept you."

" Get out of my sight!"

" One false move, and you're out of here."

" You messed up."

"I messed up..." Akira gasped to catch his breath, shaking his head free of the hurtful memories whispering around him. "No... I can't... I can't let them see. They can't find out."

Terror filled his veins, flowing into the chambers of his heart with every beat. The faster it pumped, the higher his alarm rose, until he was on high alert just standing there, trying to keep himself together.

He had to act now.

"Ryuji!" he called, racing down the stairs on shaky legs. "Ryuji, stop!"

But as soon as he landed on the ground floor, the familiar feeling of tugging in every direction heralded a shift in the spacetime around him.

Apprehension filled his heart at the thought of what awaited him, and he closed his eyes to let the Navigator take him to the Metaverse, to his own Palace.

When the Phantom Thieves landed in their Leader's Palace, they found that it had not changed a single bit since the last time they were in there. It was still dark and bleak, smelling of humidity like a place that hadn't been accessed in a long time.

"There's only one goal here today," Morgana reminded them as he usually did. "That goal is to steal the Treasure!"

"Okay, everyone!" Makoto cried out, turning to her friends. "Let's save Akira!"

"Right!" came the rallying cry of the Phantom Thieves as they followed Makoto into the darkness.

The door at the end of the corridor led them straight to the lowest floor, probably because of Joker's assistance. That made their job a hundred times easier as the doorway led them straight to the shadowy hallway leading to the cell. In the single candle's light, it was hard to tell from a distance what shape the Treasure had taken, so the Thieves spent little time before jogging over to the cell bars.

At first, they saw nothing.

"Where's the Treasure...?" Morgana frowned, squishing himself against the bars to try and see further into the cell.

"It's not here?" Yusuke echoed in alarm, a small twinge of panic settling in all of their hearts.

"It has to be..." Makoto's grip on the iron bars tightened. "Joker! Help us!"

There was a familiar gust of wind, and they all turned to see their friend's alter ego walk towards them with his usual bounce.

"You guys always do turn to me for help when you need it most," Joker noted as he approached. "No wonder Akira thinks that wearing my mask makes him a better person."

"That's not what this is about!" Ann groaned in irritation. "Listen, just help us find the Treasure. It's not where it was last time!"

"That's 'cause it's hiding," Joker huffed, walking towards the bars. Makoto and Morgana moved away to grant him access, and Joker stopped right in front of the cell. "Hiding away your heart until the bitter end, huh? I guess I shouldn't have expected anything less from you, Akira."

For a moment, all was silent, as if he'd been speaking to thin air. However, a few seconds later, there was the clinking of chains, and into the candlelight strode the hunched-over, shackled Akira they'd met throughout their trek the other day.

"Akira!" They exclaimed in unison as he appeared, looking for tired and haggard than before.

"That's it!" Morgana warned them. "That prisoner version of him is the Treasure... I can smell it!"

"So we're busting out an inmate from a prison?" Ryuji grinned. "Very fitting for Phantom Thieves!"

"I'm not gonna come out," the prisoner refuted, casting fresh silence across the rest of them. "Please. I can't leave this place."

"Akira..." Makoto sighed hopelessly. "It's no use hiding anymore. We know you've been hurting, and we just want to help you with your pain."

"Yeah... Just please, come with us, Akira!" Ann begged.

"You're a great friend before you are our Leader," Yusuke added.

"You've saved all of us before... and now we want to return the favour," Haru piped up.

"Weren't you the one who told me that dwelling on my past would never let me heal?" Futaba clenched her fists, holding eye contact with the inmate even when the latter glanced away in shame. "We're here to do the same for you!"

"Hand yourself over, Akira." Joker nudged his head at the Phantom Thieves gathered around him. "You and I both know that this is all you've ever wanted."

The inmate glanced up at Joker, holding his gaze for a long time. Everyone waited in bated breath for his answer, though it never actually came.

The prisoner broke eye contact with Joker, and glanced behind him rather conspicuously. Immediately, all eyes followed, and everyone turned.

At the end of the corridor, an Akira dressed in casual clothes stood frozen and pale-faced by the stairs.

"Another one...?" Ann sighed. "How many are there?"

"Just one," Joker whipped around, hands in his pockets. "And it's that one."

"Akira...?" Ryuji called, remembering that his friend had been wearing those same clothes today.

Akira stayed frozen for another second, and then, he was advancing upon them in rapid steps.

The Palace began to shake in a semblance of an earthquake.

"What are you doing here?" he asked, not quite angry, but not quite calm either. "Why have you come?"

"Akira..." Makoto bit her lip, moving to stand before everyone else. "I'm sorry. We couldn't tell you, but we really wanted to..."

"I don't understand..." Akira clenched his fists. "I thought we were... we were friends."

"We are!" Haru immediately answered, looking ready to jump forward and hold him. "Akira, you have to understand! We're not here to hurt you."

"Please, not again," the prisoner in the cell cried out, collapsing to the concrete floor in a loud clatter of chains. "Not another betrayal!"

"This isn't a betrayal!" Ann turned back to their friend, who seemed entirely conflicted. "Akira, let us help you. We know you've been in pain all this time!"

"Hiding behind a mask isn't going to make you feel any better," Futaba nodded in agreement. "Show us your true self and let us help you."

"I need to be strong for them," the prisoner whimpered from within his cage, lowering himself to all fours, boneless. "They'll leave me if I'm not strong."

"Shut up!" the real Akira suddenly exclaimed, glaring at his reflection through the bars murderously. "Stop talking! Stop it!"

The prisoner Akira stifled a whimper, and then dragged himself forward, disappearing into the darkness outside the candlelight. Only once he was gone did the real Akira deflate a bit.

"This can't be happening..." he murmured to himself.

"I can't believe you're going to keep trying to hide your vulnerabilities, even now, even when everyone has seen them right in front of their

eyes," Joker criticized, glancing between the now-empty cell and Akira. "I am your confidence, Akira. I am your strength. But even I will begin to waver if your heart isn't strong enough to handle me in the end."

"Why have you helped them get this far?" Akira glared at his thief persona, eyes wet with angry tears. "I never wanted this to happen."

"Didn't you?" Joker taunted, swaggering over to Akira. "You forget one thing."

Akira visibly held his breath as Joker gently removed his mask, letting him gaze straight at a perfect replica of his own face. A shiver ran down his spine at the uncanniness of the whole situation.

"I'm you," Joker reminded him firmly. "So if I helped them, it's because a part of you wanted to be saved."

There was another period of silence, where the noiseless quaking of the ground continued, before it slowly faded away. Both in respect and in confusion, the Phantom Thieves did not move, nor did they say a word, simply watching Akira struggle with himself.

In the end, Joker put his mask back on, and his form began to dissipate into thin air.

"That's more like it," he hummed, holding his translucent hand out. "It's time for you to heal."

Akira did not say a word, but when Joker's form condensed into a small ball of bluish matter, he snatched it away, and pressed it to his chest. Joker disappeared into his body without further ado, and Akira hung his head.

"Akira...?" Ryuji called out softly when he still said nothing. "You okay, bud...?"

"Just take it," Akira suddenly mumbled, surprising them all by falling to his knees.

"Akira!" Ann gasped, ready to pounce to his side. However, another, more violent quake stopped her in her tracks as the ground's shaking almost sent them all to their knees.

It stopped quickly, however, which differentiated it from the quakes of disintegrating Palaces.

"Hey... look!" Futaba called out once in was over, pointing everybody's attention to the cell door. Or lack thereof, at this point. "It's open!"

Now, the bars closing off access to the deepest recesses of Akira's heart had been lifted, and Akira's prisoner alter ego was kneeling in the candlelight again.

"Akira..." Makoto sighed, turning to the real Akira, who was also kneeling on the floor without a word. "I'm sorry."

"Just take it already," Akira repeated, a bit of an edge to his words. "Damn it... You've won."

"This isn't a question of winning." Morgana's ears flattered against his head. "Akira... Why won't you let yourself be helped...?"

"I'm afraid..." the prisoner answered instead, the glassy look in his eyes disturbing them all. "In the end, every fiber of me is afraid."

"We're gonna take that fear away from you, and you're going to get better," Ryuji clenched his fists, turning to the prisoner. "Come on. We're busting you out of here."

"No, wait." To their collective surprise, Makoto stopped them all with a wave of her hand. Her sad gaze was still on Akira's hunched form on the ground. "Akira... Please. You aren't just another target whose

heart we have to change. You're our precious friend. One way or another, all we want to do is help you."

Akira didn't say anything, but to his credit, he did look up to Makoto as she spoke. His eyes were wet with tears he was probably warring to hold back.

"We won't take your heart, Akira," she continued, ignoring Ryuji's squawk of confusion behind her. "We won't take it... if you take it instead."

Akira seemed to think about it, to his credit. His eyes went from Makoto, to the floor, to the others behind her, to his prisoner reflection, then back to the floor. He lifted his hands and looked at them, too, almost as if debating if he could grasp the victory that was being offered to him.

Finally, he let his hands drop lifelessly at his side, and dipped his head again, letting his tousled hair mask his face.

"Akira..." Haru murmured, clutching her hands to her heart. It felt like it would break if she watched their friend struggle with himself for much longer. A quick side-glance at the others proved that they were all in the same predicament, but that none of them knew what to do.

"Hey..." Futaba called out softly, getting a bit uncomfortable. "If you don't want to do it, we can just steal your heart. It's up to you."

To that, Akira finally reacted.

He moved quickly, slamming his fist down on the ground with a dull thud. The sound of his frustration (fear? Apprehension?) didn't echo very far through the concrete, but it seemed to be all that he needed.

He breathed, once, twice, then got up.

His back straightened as he walked, parting the sea of people before him for a path as other brave leaders had done before him. The

Phantom Thieves quietly stepped to the side to allow him passage, and trailed his slow, but steady movements with their eyes. If anyone breathed in that moment, it was completely lost to the reverent silence that followed in Akira's wake.

The young man approached his Treasure, watching from behind obscured glasses as his prisoner reflection followed his approach. He stopped right before the kneeling boy, and looked down upon him in a final moment of judgement.

And finally, Akira extended a hand down to his prisoner alter ego, like Joker had done for him earlier.

"I'll free you," he promised in a whisper.

The prisoner glanced at his hand in one last moment of hesitation, but then, took it without further ado. When their hands touched, the chains keeping him confined suddenly burst with a light ringing noise, and a bright light blinded everyone in the vicinity, forcing them to shield their eyes.

When the Phantom Thieves pulled their hands away from their faces, Akira and the prisoner Akira, now free of his bonds, were holding hands in the candlelight.

"I always knew you would," the prisoner finally smiled at himself, and shut his eyes peacefully.

Similarly to Joker, the prisoner also disintegrated into condensed matter, which Akira snatched up and pressed to his heart without further ado. He then bowed his head, almost as if bidding that part of him goodbye, and turned to his friends.

They looked back at him with various expressions of pride and relief, tears shining bright in their eyes.

Akira finally smiled back at them, nervously twisting a stray strand of hair like he always did when he tried to appear casual.

"So I guess we should go, huh...?" he rasped out, his tone betraying the turmoil inside of him. Almost as if reflecting that, the Palace began to quake and rumble, much harder than before. "Before this happens, I mean," Akira let out a mirthless laugh, like he'd tried and failed to make a joke.

"Yeah..." Makoto nodded. "We didn't steal the Treasure, but we're done here regardless."

"Come on, Akira," Ryuji grinned at him brightly, almost as if trying to be happy enough for the both of them. "Let's go home."

"Yeah," Akira nodded, and stepped towards his friends. The walls of his solitary confinement began to crumble around them, and as they reached the stairs, a large piece of rubble fell from the ceiling, shutting away forever the cell where he'd kept himself prisoner all his life.

"You have returned to the real world. The destination has been deleted."

Their return was heralded by the sound of someone collapsing, knees hitting the wooden planks of Leblanc's floors roughly.

"Akira!" Ann cried out, noticing him first as he crumbled. Yusuke, closest to him, managed to grab his shoulders and kneel so that his upper body collapsed against him instead of impacting the floor.

"He breathes," he announced with a trembling voice. "He must be exhausted, however."

"Hey!" A new voice joined the conversation. They all turned to see Sojiro looking over at them, alarmed at the sight of Akira's collapsed form. "What's going on!? What are you all doing here? Is he alright?"

"Don't worry, Sojiro," Futaba stepped in. "We went out to take care of some Phantom Thief business, and Akira's just really exhausted."

"You better not be causing trouble, Futaba," Sojiro groaned, still inching towards them. "Should I close the café? Does he need a doctor?"

"It'll be fine, Boss," Makoto shook her head, seeming oddly pleased. "We'll all move upstairs with him and stay with him until he wakes up. He should be just fine."

"Better than just fine," Ryuji added as an afterthought. "Come on. Yusuke and I can carry him upstairs."

"Don't make too much noise," Sojiro warned them half-heartedly. "And let me know if you need something."

"Delicious, delicious curry," Futaba hummed, but followed the others. "But... maybe later. Right now, we gotta get this guy to bed."

Sojiro nodded, and let them go without another word, though he did glance worriedly once more at Akira's limp body as it was carried up by Ryuji and Yusuke.

The boys carefully laid Akira down on his mattress with meticulousness that was rather uncharacteristic of them, especially Ryuji. Ann helped pull Akira's shoes off and Futaba removed and folded his glasses. Haru soon rushed upstairs with a wet towel, which she then used to wipe Akira's face and remove the telltale dried tears that tracked his cheeks. Morgana curled up next to Akira's face, watching his peaceful expression for any changes.

"I guess we should let him rest..." Makoto suggested, though nobody made a move to leave him.

"Okay. I call the corner there," Futaba pointed at the bed, and then crawled into the corner in a sitting position.

"I suppose we shall all settle ourselves here for a moment," Yusuke voiced what they were all thinking.

"You should all get some rest, too," Morgana added. "The battle's not over yet. All we've done is convince him to open his heart to us... so we have to be ready for when he wants to lean on us."

"Right..." Makoto acquiesced. "But we're gonna help him let go of his pain. Remember all that he's done for every one of us, and let that push you forward. He's always needed us, even when we weren't there for him."

She glanced at Akira's sleeping face with a mixed expression of concern and relief, and then sat on the side of his bed.

"Let's show him that we'll be here unconditionally, from now on," she finished, and was glad to see everybody nod in unanimous agreement.

When Akira woke up, he knew something was wrong, and yet, he felt lighter than before. The sound of many people breathing in his surroundings alerted him, and he sat up slowly. In the orange of the sunset filtering through the small windows, he quickly discerned the seven other people who were strewn around his room, in various positions that seemed more or less comfortable. Some of them next to him on the bed, others on the sofa, others on a chair, they all stood by him, snoozing as they waited for him to wake.

Speaking of which, his activity brought movement from his side, and Akira looked down to see Morgana moving out of his curled position to stretch.

"So... You're finally awake, huh...?" he began in a low voice as not to disturb the others.

"No chance that my Palace was a dream, right?" Akira smirked weakly, ruffling his bedhead to give it some semblance of order.

"No chance," Morgana shook his tiny head, and then bumped Akira's side with his wet little nose in a gesture of affection. "We're still

here."

And indeed, they were. Akira let his eyes trail over his friends, realizing that they were not only accomplices, but also confidants, in which he could place his trust forevermore. The bonds he'd forged with them were special, and he would not have to hide anything from them anymore.

He wouldn't have to be afraid anymore.

"Welcome home," Morgana murmured, smiling lightly when Akira's eyes welled up with tears.

And without a mask to hide behind, Akira finally let himself cry.

Author's Note

Acknowledge Akira Kurusu as a massive trauma victim 2k17

Did my bias for Ryuji/Akira slip in there? Yes? My bad. Their relationship is just fantastic though. Their circumstances are so similar and Ryuji was Akira's first friend and confidant, so their bond is worth thousands to me. More than Akira's bond with his parents Imao, because which parent in their right fuckin mind sends their falsely-accused minor son to another city, under the care of a stranger for a whole year, because they can't handle him? GDI.

In other news, I do like Ann a lot, but I think she's more into Ryuji than Akira, lol. Makoto is a fun friend, but her personality really doesn't click with Akira's imo. Futaba's the annoying little sister, ofc, and Haru comes in too late in the game for me to feel the chemistry with Akira. So that leads me to conclude that the female party members are non-romanceable, in my book. Wish I could romance some dudes. Ryuji could be fun, though he really is more of a bro than anything else... Yusuke... maybe? But dude... Iwai. I would romance Iwai. Hands down, no

questions asked, all filth included, I would romance the shady arms dealer, leggo.

Anyway, that's that. I wish P5 had a bigger fanbase. I want to read more painful Akira fanfics, and of course, write some. My next project is gonna be a NG+ time loop AU. Cliché, I know, but bear with me. It'll be good.

Hope you enjoyed! Please leave me a comment if you liked it or nah!
